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Editorial

Dear readers,

This issue partially builds on the outcomes of the biennial conference of the Czech Association for Social Anthropology, which took place in 2025 in Pardubice, and focused on the theme "Ageing of Anthropology, Ageing in Anthropology." At the conference, the two keynote speakers, Andrew Russell and Jeanette Pols, decided to revise their presentations into full-length articles and submit them to Cargo Journal for the peer review process. Given their prominence in contemporary anthropology, we greatly appreciate these contributions.

Andrew J. Russell is a graduate of the University of Oxford and the University of Pennsylvania and a leading figure in the field of biomedical anthropology. He is known for his research among the Yakha people in Nepal and for his contributions to transnational public health studies. His *Anthropology of Tobacco* is particularly highly valued. This book, which he published in 2019, is a retrospective and transnational overview that presents tobacco as one of the commodities that has continuously accompanied humanity through many stages of its development, "delineates and traverses boundaries between our bodies and the external world," and "facilitates interaction between people in some cases but, in others, blocks it" (2019: 224). In his contribution to *Cargo*, the author retrospectively traces the developmental changes anthropology has undergone and identifies what he considers to be its most fundamental transformations.

Jeannette Pols, the Professor of Anthropology of Everyday Ethics at the Department of Anthropology, Faculty of Behavioural & Social Sciences, and the Department of Ethics, Law & Humanities of the Amsterdam Medical Centre, University of Amsterdam, graduated with degrees in Social Philosophy and Clinical Psychology from the University of Groningen and received a PhD from the University of Twente. Experts from many countries around the world are involved in her projects focused on the theory and ethics of science and "Reinventing the Good Life" through the use of new technologies. Her "research tools developed from a material semiotic elaboration of domestication theory"

(Pols 2012: 17) apply the view that "animals, plants and technologies do not determine our lives but come to live with us, in our homes, and on our terms." (Pols 2012: 18) The next question, then, is how this coexistence works. She suggested a topic for *Cargo Journal* that is closely related to this issue and analyses different constellations of relationships that are hidden under the label 'community'.

The following text also deals with new technologies. Petr Mareš discusses the technological singularity here. Through an interdisciplinary analysis, the text interprets this postmodern phenomenon as a cybercultural myth that revitalises traditional eschatological notions of salvation and the transcendence of humanity, leading to the emergence of a posthuman entity—the metahuman.

The block of peer-reviewed studies concludes with Petr Macek and Veronika Hujacová's text, "From Alternative Lifestyles to Conspiracy Theories." The concept of conspirituality, as used in the text, relates to the issue of control over the products and resources a person has at their disposal and wishes to utilise in their life.

The four peer-reviewed studies are followed by two book reviews.

Zdeněk Uherek

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Russell, Andrew J. 2019. *Anthropology of Tobacco: Ethnographic Adventures in Non-human Worlds*. London, New York: Routledge.

Best of Times, Worst of Times – Social Anthropology 1975–2025

Andrew Russell

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Abstract: *In this article the author traces the parallel themes of 'ageing in anthropology' and the 'ageing of anthropology' by reflecting on the experience of being an academic exposed to and working in the academic and institutional contexts of predominantly British social anthropology from the mid-1970s to the present. The author adopts an autoethnographic approach, describing and reflecting on what he discerns as some of the key changes in the discipline over this fifty-year period, as well as some of his responses to them. What have been the enablers and levers – ideological, technological, geopolitical, economic – through which anthropology as a discipline, and his practice of it, has changed? Given the 'decades of crises' (Ringel 2021), the effects of the Anthropocene (including the impact of Covid-19 and other emergent pandemics), the increase in global inequalities, the growth of authoritarianism and the hegemony of corporate capitalism, should one dare to hope for the future of anthropology? What hopes can there be for the future of the discipline both within academia and beyond?*

Keywords: *Autoethnography; ageing in and of anthropology; higher education*

The eventual anthropologist

I retired fully from 32 years' employment in a UK anthropology department on 30 September 2024. I thus feel able to write authoritatively about the twin themes of the 8th Biennial Conference of the Czech Association of Social Anthropologists (CASA) – 'ageing in anthropology' (for I have done just that) and my own experience and reflections on the 'ageing of anthropology' as a discipline – drawing,

inevitably, on my particular academic and institutional contexts and position. Czechia, appropriately enough, has been the site of two conferences that have bookended my career: the 2nd Biennial Conference of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) held in Prague in July 1992, and the aforementioned 8th CASA Biennial in Pardubice in November 2025. In this article, I shall first outline my own trajectory into social anthropology as a discipline, before focusing on three themes in particular that, I shall argue, override – or at least strongly shape – the intellectual developments that might be the expected focus of any account concerning the ageing of our discipline. The first theme is the growth in ethics; the second is what I call the democratisation of anthropology; and the third is the technological developments that shaped how we are able to conduct ourselves as global anthropologists. I hope my experiences provide some degree of wisdom from the past as well as pointers to the future that are of both personal and disciplinary value to current and future generations of social anthropologists.

The title of this article comes from the opening of Charles Dickens' (1859/2007) novel *A Tale of Two Cities*, published in instalments in 1859, but with the French Revolution of the 1770s as its focal point. The paradox of the opening sentence, 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times', is repeated in the subsequent statements:

> *It was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way.*

Dickens carries on, 'In short, the period was so far like the present period that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.'

Like the 1770s (the era in which the novel is set) and 1859 (the year of its writing), so our own period – and indeed discipline – is marked by such dualities, which anthropology aspires to iron out, or at least explain, through a process glibly referred to as 'making the strange familiar, and the familiar strange'. Jorge Luis Borges (2013) rather acerbically notes that 'Dickens lived in London…He really could not write a tale of two cities. He was a resident of just one city: London'. Anthropologists, by contrast, are 'travelers who like to stay and dig in (for a time)' (Clifford 1992: 22). Except that, today, we are as likely to dig in on the global stage as the local one, and often have too little time to stay.

In the autoethnographic, life-history account that follows, I use the approach taken by Grøn and Meinert (2025), in which large- and small-scale histories rub against each other across a range of short- and long-term temporal registers.[1] In the Introduction to this special issue the editors also argue contentiously that the notion of 'time' is 'ontologically groundless', a point I find hard to square with my own lived experience. While I don't have space to pursue it here, I am also inspired by Michael Jackson's (2021) *The Genealogical Imagination: Two Studies of Life Over Time* for its exploration of temporality through the lens of intergenerational trauma, of how large-scale events in one generation can or may reverberate into the next. As current generations work through relationships with their ancestors, in anthropology as in life, it is impossible to escape what Jackson calls 'the gravitational pull of the past'.

Ageing in anthropology – the student years

I didn't learn much about anthropology where I was brought up, a small town on the south coast of England called Bexhill-on-Sea (hereafter 'Bexhill').[2] A seaside resort that had become a popular retirement destination due to its relatively moderate climate, Bexhill had the reputation in the 1960s and 70s when I lived there for being the town with the oldest elderly population on average of any town in Europe. A standing joke at the time (at the expense of confused members of the elderly population who were its major demographic) was that Bexhill was the only place in the world where you had to look both ways before crossing a one-way street.

It was also, however, a town of the unexpected. The De La Warr Pavillion, for example, designed by German émigrés and Bauhaus architects Erich Mendelsohn and Serge Chermayeff, who won a design competition in 1935, is sometimes described as the first major Modernist public building in Britain.[3]

1 It is also, interestingly, the approach used by Nobel Prize-winning author Annie Ernaux (2008/2017) to telling effect in her book *The Years*.

2 Bexhill is situated west of Hastings, a name famous for the 1066 Battle of Hastings, when the Norman duke William the Conqueror invaded to become King William 1 of England. To the west of Bexhill is Eastbourne – a town where, somewhat paradoxically given its contemporary demographic and political leanings, Karl Marx wrote much of *Das Kapital*.

3 Mendelsohn and Chermayeff worked under Mies van der Rohe, architect of the equally iconic 'Villa Tugendhat' in Brno – an interesting UK–Czechia connection (see Lambek 2022).

Figure 1: *Map showing the location of Bexhill-on-Sea* (Contains Ordnance Survey data © Crown copyright and database right, CC BY-SA 3.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0>, via Wikimedia Commons)

Figure 2: *Bexhill-on-Sea – Free entertainment options* (photo by the author)

Figure 3: *Three images of Bexhill-on-Sea, c. 1960* (photo by the author)

I sometimes wonder whether being a young person in such a town shaped a certain individuation, a 'betwixt and between' detachment in me that is the hallmark of what has come to be seen as the classic tradition of 'lone scholar' anthropological fieldwork.

My first introduction to anthropology as a subject of more than 'academic' interest was through 'Project Trust', an organisation headquartered on the Isle of Coll in the Scottish Hebrides, where the director and his retinue ran a selection centre. This educational charity sent school-leaver volunteers to live and work in an overseas community for a year. They had an opening for someone to teach spoken English and run a 'Children's Corner' in Mitraniketan (Kerala State, South India), a Gandhian-style rural community-education-cum-training centre, where I lived from October 1976 to August 1977. This formative experience was something that I would never have had without the support of an organisation like this. It was also what first gave me a sense of anthropology as a fascinating subject with something important to offer, since during that time I got to know a social anthropologist, Nigel Goodall, who was doing PhD fieldwork with a potter caste in a village two bus rides away from Mitraniketan. In his company, I attended various ritual events, such as an all-night outdoor séance in which his landlord

became possessed by the lineage spirit and took part in a series of symbolic and divinatory performances.

By the time I arrived at university, I had therefore begun to have second thoughts about the degree programme to which I'd been accepted. As I rather awkwardly had to explain to the English tutor on the degree course from which I needed to extract myself, I had spent ten months in the company of what in those days was 500 million people, most of whom had never heard of Keats, Shakespeare or Dickens and, as far as I could make out, were none the worse for their lack of knowledge. Fortunately, there was a place available on a more congenial course, the multidisciplinary social and biological sciences degree programme called 'Human Sciences', and I was permitted to transfer into it only a few weeks after the start.

As but one of seven disciplinary areas covered by the Human Sciences degree, the social anthropology I picked up at Oxford was somewhat patchy. The main set of lectures I attended in the subject were given by Edwin Ardener, who gave a memorable potted history of the ageing of anthropological theory. For him, social anthropology had cantered through a set of theoretical eras, summarised by three amusingly shifting statements, viz. 'rationality is a feature of modern societies alone' (the assumption of the 19th-century evolutionists); 'rationality is not a feature of modern societies alone' (the 20th-century structuralist approach); 'rationality is not a feature of modern societies' (the post-structuralist approach). We also touched on how demography is a qualitative state of mind as much as a numerical reality (thinking about the so-called 'lost generation' of young British men as a result of the First World War). There was also the simple statement, 'Whatever happened to the Roman Empire?' However, there was a sense of precious exclusivity about the whole thing, evinced in a statement by one social anthropologist (not Edwin Ardener) gently disparaging the knowledge of others because 'they don't share *our* way of thinking'.

I harboured no aspirations for a career in higher education at that time, but I was keen to continue with the broad-brush, multidisciplinary approach of the Human Sciences if I carried on at postgraduate level at all. As a result of a successful application for a Thouron Award to study at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia for two years from 1982-4, I pursued the MS Biomedical Anthropology degree that was offered there at that time. Here I developed a much stronger sense of anthropology as a discipline, the 'four fields' approach championed in the United States offering a much more coherent structure than the rather piecemeal and divided sense of it I had from Oxford University. One of the articles by a faculty member from that time is Igor Kopytoff's (1971) 'Ancestors as Elders in Africa'. Death, he argues, is not a definitive state; ancestors (as part of 'the broader phenomenon of "eldership"') are always with us – a point echoed with

more contemporary nuance by Susan Reynolds-Whyte in the 'Ageing Time Beings' volume and which makes sense when considering 'the ageing of anthropology'.

The choice of topic for my master's dissertation – 'Depo-Provera, an anthropological analysis' – was my first attempt to do research that was useful to others. Bereft of any obvious topic I wanted to pursue for its own intellectual value, I contacted the Philadelphia-based American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) and was introduced to the injectable contraceptive Depo-Provera, at that time a controversial product being evaluated by the Food and Drug Administration for licensing in the United States. What were the rights and wrongs of Depo as a contraceptive, the AFSC asked? My dissertation failed to provide them with the kind of definitive answers they sought. Rather, I ended up showing how different kinds of 'science' and scientific evidence could be used to support the arguments both for and against the contraceptive (Russell 1999), and how difficult it is to know the long-term effects of any pharmaceutical product. These somewhat inconclusive conclusions are often a feature of applied work in anthropology. There are two sides to every story – in this case, the message was that, irrespective of its safety concerns, for some women Depo was the best of contraceptives; for some women the worst.

The Director of Project Trust had offered me a job as a desk officer living on the Isle of Coll before I left for the United States. I returned to Britain in 1984 in the company of Tamara (Tammy) Kohn, an American PhD-track student at the University of Pennsylvania whose original plan was to do fieldwork in Amazonia. The Isle of Coll offered an interesting shift in both research direction and institutional affiliation for her. I introduced her to Edwin Ardener, who had developed research interests in the Scottish Hebrides to supplement his original and more classic fieldwork interests in Cameroon. Tammy was successful in securing a PhD place and scholarship support at Oxford and, with the help of a small furniture van and a friend visiting from Australia, we shifted all our worldly goods, including a baby grand piano, from my mother's house in Bexhill to the Isle of Coll.

Three years living and working on a Hebridean island was indeed a terrific experience at that stage of my life, but, despite Edwin Ardener's (2012) claims that 'remote areas' are largely a state of mind, I felt ready to return to more mainstream, mainland life at the end of it. This was another crossroads moment for me, deciding whether to continue in the non-academic field broadly categorised as 'the voluntary sector', or to return to academia and follow Tammy (who was writing up her PhD at that point) in pursuing a doctorate of my own. The main challenge I faced for further postgraduate study was in securing funding, particularly when based on a Hebridean island in the pre-internet era, but I was fortunate in being able to stay with friends in London for a few nights, which enabled me to make contact with relevant people and develop a proposal.

The main funding body for social science research in the United Kingdom, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), was keen to support applied research and ran a studentship scheme – Collaborative Awards in the Social Sciences – designed to bring academic and non-academic bodies together for the purpose of PhD supervision. As with Depo Provera, I lacked a personal project that motivated me intellectually, so I again approached likely organisations asking if they had current topics or issues which they saw as ripe for anthropological research under this scheme. The most positive and practical response came from Dr Sean Conlin, social development advisor at what was the UK government's aid and development wing, the Overseas Development Administration (ODA). He suggested two areas the ODA was working in that would benefit from some in-depth social anthropological input. One was family planning in Bangladesh, the other was social forestry in Nepal. For various reasons, I chose Nepal.

Nearly two years elapsed between success in securing the ESRC studentship funding and departing for fieldwork in rural Nepal. In that time the ODA had taken the decision to contract the operation of their Koshi Hills Area Rural Development Project (KHARDEP) to a firm of development consultants. This 'privatisation' of KHARDEP made completing the applied dimension of my PhD problematic. The expatriate development consultants in Nepal thought I was a spy sent out from the ODA's headquarters in London to evaluate their performance; an added complication was that staff at the ODA's regional office in Bangkok liked to think they were in charge of what happened in the SE Asia 'region', not staff in London. I had inadvertently stepped into a hornets' nest of suspicion and intrigue and risked becoming a political football between different parties seeking to establish their power and influence over each other.

Fortunately, because my collaborative award funding came directly from the ESRC, I was not beholden to the ODA or its consultants financially. My supervisor, Nick Allen, and I had identified a Tibeto-Burman group called the Yakha (or Yakkha, if one is spelling it correctly) who were based in the middle of the KHARDEP project and who appeared never to have been the subject of anthropological research. On a reconnaissance trek into the area, Tammy and I identified a dispersed village settlement, Tamaphok, which was in many respects the cultural heartland of the Yakkha. We were offered accommodation in the house of the *pradhan panch* (village head) with his wife and his daughter, Kamala, and so decided to make that the base for our fieldwork. Thus we learnt about momentous events, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, from a scratchy-sounding radio in a wooden extension to the *pradhan panch*'s house, looking out across the spectacular Maya Khola valley to the Himalayan peak of Mount Makalu beyond.

Figure 5: *Working with informants – Tamaphok 1990* (photo by Tamara Kohn)

Having reached 'the field', I was also aware that forests and forest use in Tamaphok were only one element of Yakkha environmental relations. My eventual PhD thesis, 'The Yakha: Culture, Environment and Development in East Nepal', focused on the meanings of 'environment' for the Yakkha, of which forests were only a small part, and which encompassed the social and spiritual as well as physical environments in both Tamaphok and the world beyond.[4]

As time progressed, I was also struck by how much movement there was through the middle hills of Nepal, migratory and otherwise. The need for such movement posed its own unexpected and largely unwelcome challenges. In the cold winter months of our second year of fieldwork, Tammy developed pneumonia and had to be carried out of Tamaphok by a porter in a basket to seek medical attention and convalesce. A few months later, on my way back from buying provisions in the nearest roadhead town – a four-hour walk up the hill ridge above Tamaphok, a one-hour walk down the other side – I slipped and fell on a muddy path, fracturing my right arm.

4 My respective external and internal DPhil examiners were Lionel Caplan and Wendy James.

The following day, after an agonising night, I had to return up and down the path and take a bus down to the nearest hospital in the lowland Tarai. Here my wrist was successfully reset, but I am right-handed, so my emergent plans to study Yakkha migrants from Tamaphok to other parts of Nepal had to be put on hold.[5] People in Tamaphok put my misfortune down to the operations of Sogek, a spirit of myth and legend that causes mischief to unwary travellers (Russell 2000a).

As well as what I learnt from my direct fieldwork experiences over the course of 21 months – about the pitfalls of attempting to do applied research, for example, or the inherent risks associated with fieldwork in 'remote' locales – some key publications helped shape my PhD thesis and reflected the 'ageing of anthropology' that was happening at that time. One was Alan Macfarlane's (1976) *Resources and Population*, based on his research among the Gurungs in Thak, further to the west of Nepal. Demography, he argues in this book, is a key unacknowledged factor in social life. I could appreciate this point, having grown up amongst a predominantly elderly population in Bexhill and having spent time doing research in a situation where transient migration, primarily of young men in East Nepal, was commonplace. But it was less the impact of population structures on other aspects of life, such as resource provision, and more the phenomenological effects of demography – having to look both ways along a one-way street in Bexhill, or the 'here today gone tomorrow' aspects of migration on those who left and those who remained behind in Tamaphok (Russell 1992) – that interested me. Another was the growing sense of uncertainty about old tropes such as 'subsistence farming in the hills causes flooding in the plains below', reflected in works such as Thompson et al.'s (1986) *Uncertainty on a Himalayan Scale*. It had taken this group five years' work to reach conclusions such as 'it is less the facts, than what would you like the facts to be?' that is significant. Retrospectively, this was a lightbulb point in my intellectual development as an anthropologist, somewhat on a par with the contra-Durkheimian statement 'society explains nothing but is itself to be explained' (Krarup and Blok 2011: 43). But perhaps the hardships endured in much anthropological fieldwork – the broken bones, the respiratory problems – are, like time itself, a challenge to the overly easy dismissal of 'facts' as ontologically groundless?

[5] My research on Yakkha migrants came later, funded by the Leverhulme Trust – see Russell (2000b) and Russell (2007).

Ageing in anthropology – the professional years

I had first visited Durham in November 1975, for an undergraduate interview to read English. My second visit, in 1991, was to attend the ASA conference, which was serendipitously themed 'Environment and Environmentalism'. Here I heard a joke that resonated strongly with my perceptions about the importance (and consequences) of extraneous factors in success and failure:

> Question: '*Why do dolphins have the reputation for helping push swimmers in difficulties towards the shore*?'
> Answer: '*Because you don't hear again from the swimmers they push in the other direction*.'

Employment possibilities in higher education tend to ebb and flow. I was fortunate that the late 1980s was a fairly expansionist period in UK higher education after some pretty fallow years earlier in that decade. Durham was one of several universities seeking part-time, temporary teaching staff that year. However, as a result of a visit by Margaret Thatcher to the region in 1987 and a pledge to higher education-centred urban renewal, Durham University was collaborating with the University of Teesside to open a new campus in Stockton-on-Tees, about 25 kilometres south of Durham (Melhuish 2015). Under the tutelage of Michael Carrithers, the Anthropology Department was actively pursuing distinctive degree programmes to put on there and hence had some longer-term posts to offer. Between us, Tammy and I offered a broad range of educational skills and research interests. We applied, and were accepted, as a job share.

Job sharing remains an unusual arrangement in academic employment but is one I can highly recommend. Working half-time gave me the chance to finish my PhD thesis and have my viva in Oxford within six months. Durham University essentially got 'two for the price of one' in terms of employees. On an everyday level, Tammy and I adopted the approach that if one of us was in the office the other one shouldn't be, although it wasn't always as simple as that, since job sharers face the intractable problem that sometimes there are important institutional events that you both need to be at. We also found strong currents (including financial ones) pulling us towards full-time employment. With my master's level background in medical anthropology, for example, I was asked to do the development work for a second anthropology degree at Stockton, to be named Health and Human Sciences. This required me to work full-time. Tammy also went full-time to accommodate all the teaching demands that were made of her. We separated and divorced five years later.

Durham proved to be an institution which, for all its faults (and what institution doesn't have them?), offered the flexibility to take up initiatives and try out new roles as my eventual career in anthropology developed. Looking back, I can discern three main phases to that career. The first was working with colleagues developing and delivering the Human Sciences and Health and Human Sciences degrees at Stockton Campus, and becoming involved in developing qualitative health-related research opportunities in the northeast of England (initially in contraception, gastro-enterology, and primary health care). The second was becoming part of new developments in medical education, which went through an expansionist phase in the later 1990s. Durham went into partnership with Newcastle University to establish the first two years of a five-year medical degree programme at the Stockton Campus, which commenced in 2001. I was keen to explore the relevance of anthropology beyond its own disciplinary boundaries and so joined the multidisciplinary team assembled to develop, teach and research this 'early years' programme. My own contribution was as lead for the social and behavioural sciences strand of the curriculum – 'Medicine in the Community'. An innovative feature of this strand was a community placement scheme. Based on the medical anthropological principle that between 70% and 90% of all healthcare takes place without reference to any sort of health professional, this required all 100 first- and second-year medical students to spend one session a week over the period of a calendar year working in a volunteer role with a plethora of mainly non-clinical health and social care providers in the Stockton area. This exposure to largely non-clinical lifeworlds, about which they were expected to write a 3000-word ethnographic report at the end, was an eye-opening experience for many medical students (Russell 2011).

The third phase involved the transfer of some of the knowledge, skills and experience gleaned from that community-based programme into a new role, as the university's first Director of Community Outreach and Engagement. This petered out (rather like the Roman Empire) as external funding for community outreach work largely evaporated in the austerity years between 2010 and 2019. However, one of the initiatives from those days that has stood the test of time is a volunteering scheme for university staff. This enables staff to undertake up to a week's paid work each year with voluntary sector organisations operating outside the lifeworld of the university. However, despite the effort and innovation I put into curriculum development for both the Health and Human Sciences degree and the Medicine programme, the textbook for medical students (Russell 2009) I wrote that was awarded the British Medical Journal's student textbook of the year award in 2010, and my extensive outreach work beyond the university, it was not until my monograph *Anthropology of Tobacco* was published (Russell 2019) that I attained a professorship in the department.

The ageing of anthropology

I could wax lyrical about the intellectual developments that have taken place in anthropology as it has aged over the past fifty years – the shift from function to meaning, the diversification of subdisciplines, the growth of applied anthropology, the Foucauldian revolution, the postmodern 'writing culture' critique, the rise of material culture studies, decolonisation and the reflexive focus of 'anthropology at home'. However, the three elements that seem most significant to me in changing the character of the discipline during this period are less theoretical and more practical. I am calling them the ethicisation of anthropology; the democratisation of anthropology; and the technologisation of anthropology.

The ethicisation of anthropology has been a marked feature of the discipline over the past 30 years. When I began, fieldwork like mine in East Nepal was conducted with no formal ethical approvals in place whatsoever! This is not to say research practices at that time were unethical. Social anthropology has always had moral and ethical questions at its heart, and although there are blind spots when it comes to considering the broader issues of power and positionality inherent in the anthropological enterprise, at the level of the individual fieldworker, ethics are almost impossible to ignore. What has been lacking, until recently, are the bureaucratic frameworks of ethical review, fuelled by the pernicious growth of what Strathern (2000) calls 'audit cultures'. It is interesting to note, though, that the two international research symposia that preceded a key article on the formalisation of research ethics were titled 'Have we become too ethical?' and 'How can we become more ethical?', respectively.[6] What is commonly accepted as a medical model of ethical practice, involving information sheets and consent forms, has been raised to a level of authority that risks compromising the goals of most social anthropology, namely to capture the blooming, buzzing confusion of everyday life in all its nuanced complexity. Operating within the confines of research that has been granted ethical approval by a departmental or university ethics committee can have a chilling effect when it comes to taking up unexpected opportunities that may arise during fieldwork, but which fall outside the purview of that approval.[7]

What is less frequently considered in recent critiques of the bureaucratisation of ethics and ethical processes in the social sciences is the continuing extractive nature of much research in social anthropology – where communities are used as a vehicle for the advancement of the individual anthropologist (or the anthropological

6 See Sleeboom-Faulkner et al. (2017).
7 Budilová and Jakoubek (2024) make a similar point.

enterprise more generally) and gain little in return. Participatory Action Research (PAR), by contrast (which I became particularly interested in through working with Durham University's Centre for Social Justice and Community Action), is about working 'with' communities rather than 'on' them. Because a version of the term 'participation' is embedded in what is a hallmark of social anthropological research, namely 'participant observation', I think there is a tendency for anthropologists to assume they are doing participatory work when in fact there may be little that is truly participatory (in the PAR sense) within it. Given that PAR is based on principles of co-production, it can be very difficult to identify how a participatory research project is likely to evolve, making PAR a model that is even more difficult to fit within bureaucratic ethical review structures.

The second topic in which I have observed dramatic developments over the years is the democratisation of anthropology. Social anthropology in many countries has been the domain, some would say the preserve, of an elite group of scholars, a significant minority of whom were from the aristocracy, and amongst whom the rather precious 'our way of thinking' approach held sway. Stockton Campus was deliberately set up in a place where uptake of higher education was traditionally low; its mission statement was to 'serve the needs of the Teesside community'. To make its offer to that community compelling, anthropology had to broaden its relevance and appeal to those who might otherwise never have knowingly come into contact with it as an academic discipline.

There was something of a bottleneck of older adults on Teesside who had lacked the chance to study for an undergraduate degree, and for the first ten years at Stockton a significant proportion of our student body consisted of mature students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds. Various innovative features characterised the anthropology degrees that were established there. In 2004, realising how few students had been anywhere outside the Euro-American axis, I organised a study tour to India. During a three-week visit, operating on a shoestring, 24 students spent a week at Mitraniketan as well as experiencing the contrasts between life in the north and life in the south of the country (Russell 2004).

I was also responsible, with my colleague Bob Simpson, for designing a third-year credit-bearing module, 'Knowledge and Practice', intended to help students prepare for the world of work. The trend towards offering students practical as well as intellectual skills transferred to Durham itself with the demise of the Stockton Campus, marked by the development of a distinctive programme of week-long, off-campus field courses that all students were expected to attend at the end of their second year. Another way in which one could say anthropology has democratised, or at least broadened its base in the academic community in research terms, has been the shift from the 'lone researcher' activities that characterised

Figure 6: *Durham University Study Tour to India, July 2004* (photographer unknown)

Figure 7: *Anthropology field course to the Isle of Coll, September 2018* (photo by the author)

my time in Nepal to the more collaborative activities in which the anthropologist is expected to act as a member of a multi- or interdisciplinary team.

The ageing of anthropology has perhaps been most pronounced in the field of technological developments. When I started work at Durham in 1992, all communication was either oral, by landline telephone or by typed (or hand-written) memo. All text-based materials were delivered to individual staff shelves (called 'pigeon-holes') in a part of the building, the 'post room', in which all inward and outward mail was processed. The idea of each staff member having their own PC or MacBook was just coming to be accepted, although I typed and printed my own PhD thesis in 1990 using an Amstrad computer. The ability to transfer or share work with others was far from easy, however, and file names were limited to a maximum of eight digits. Overhead projectors were the norm, and acetate sheets, chalkboards and handouts were the main visual aids used in teaching. Fast forward 35 years and digital technologies reign supreme, supported by mobile technologies such as phones and laptops and software for our Macs and PCs provided by computer giants such as Google and Microsoft. Anthropology has diversified in both its content and subject matter as a result – for example, with visual anthropology and digital anthropology. That is before we address more recent innovations, for example in Artificial Intelligence and online meetings, the latter accelerated by the challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic.

I am also struck by how the new technologies have revolutionised what it is possible to do in research terms. The research I did for *Anthropology of Tobacco* derived not only from traditional ethnographic methods but also from some of the extraordinary developments that have taken place in the digital humanities. Searches of historical literature for topics such as 'tobacco' and 'smoking', which at the start of my career would have required years of library-based book reading, could be done in minutes. This undoubtedly enabled me to see the 'wood' (of patterns and trends through time) for the 'trees' of individual literary items.

As well as what is in some ways the 'best of times' in research terms, the technologisation of anthropology also raises some 'worst of times' issues concerning the long-term effects of the travel technologies on which the discipline was founded and on which much of its development in the second half of the 20th century has been based.

Hans Baer's (2019) criticism of anthropologists flying halfway around the world to present a 15-minute conference paper should be a wake-up call to all who are concerned about the effects of our environmental footprint on those with whom we work and conduct research. As well as a reminder of the potential for zoonotic diseases to spread because of all this intercontinental travel, the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated how digital communication, while not the same as

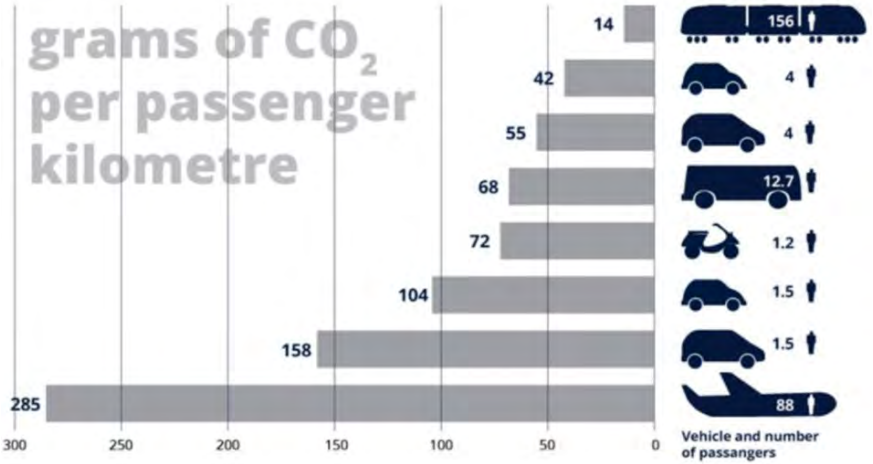

Figure 8: *Grams of CO2 per passenger kilometre. (Source: European Environment Agency Report TERM 2014* (in Baer 2019). https://www.eea.europa.eu/media/infographics/co2-emissions-from-passenger-transport/view.

'in-person', offers ways not only of democratising contact (at least for those with the necessary technologies) but of reducing our carbon footprint.

Sceptical of squandering the value of 'being there' ethnography altogether, and following on from research into the ways international law was developed and (perhaps) implemented through the Conference of the Parties to the WHO's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), in 2023 I decided to compare these ways of working with those of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). I was struck by the irony of how the UNFCCC 28th Conference of the Parties (COP28) was being held in Dubai, a destination awash with petrodollars that it is almost impossible to reach from other parts of the world except by flying. I resolved to put my 'green credentials' to the test by travelling to COP28 using overland forms of public transport as much as possible. Apart from the shortest possible flight (from Antalya in southern Turkey to Amman in Jordan) to overfly the 'garland of war zones' between Europe and the Gulf States, I managed to do the whole journey by train and bus, a reduction in carbon emissions of 75% over flying. I documented the experience iteratively through four blog posts and what became a 700-image Instagram account for 150 'followers' who coalesced around it (Russell 2023a; 2023b). This was a very different kind of research activity to the early, more extractive empirical research in a development context I had done with the Yakkha in East Nepal.

Figure 9: *Durham to Dubai. Slide used in a presentation to students at Teikyo University, Durham, October 2023* (prepared by the author)

Discussion

This has been a relatively upbeat account of an 'ageing in anthropology' and the 'ageing of anthropology', based as it is on my experience as a white, middle-class British male with leanings towards multidisciplinarity, interdisciplinarity and doing research that is useful to others. I appreciate my own positionality in the narrative I have presented: many of my observations derive from academic and institutional contexts reflected in a narrative arc which, despite 'worst of times' setbacks, has been chiefly one of creation, development and maturity, not endings, decay and death. Rivoal and Salazar (2013) argue serendipity is not only about unplanned good fortune but also the wisdom to recognise it as such, and I appreciate the role it has played in my academic life.

A lot of the elements to this story are no longer present, at least not in the form they once had. However, like ancestors, they remain with us, donning the past with a sense of not only 'best of times' heritage, but also 'worst of times' legacies (cf. Hann 2025). For example, the era of big-jet, mass air travel, which enabled organisations like Project Trust to flourish and anthropology as a discipline to expand and democratise in the ways it did from the 1970s onwards, may be coming to an end. The distant events I had barely been able to hear on a battery-powered radio in Nepal in 1989 opened up individual travel and scholarly exchange possibilities previously denied many of those in the Eastern European

region. This further powered the growth and development of European anthropology, as marked by the milestone 2nd Biennial Conference of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) held in Prague in July 1992, which I was able to attend.

However, the changes to institutions mentioned in this article indicate the 'best of times' (assuming that is what they were) are coming to an end. On 5 October an article appeared in Glasgow-based *The Herald* newspaper stating that for financial reasons Project Trust was going to be leaving the Isle of Coll.[8] On 2 November 2025 I visited the now defunct Stockton Campus, a place I had not been to for a very long time. There wasn't tumbleweed blowing across the forlorn-looking site, but there might as well have been. From a satellite campus of Durham University,[9] to an International Study Centre incubating students, many from East Asia, with the language skills and orientation necessary for them to access Durham undergraduate degree programmes, there seemed very little happening on the day I visited.

The two student colleges created out of halls of residence to give Stockton students an educational experience more akin to that of the main (Durham) campus have been relocated to Durham. One of the Stockton college buildings had been renamed 'Endeavour House'. Two gentlemen, sunning themselves on a bench in front of the Ebsworth Building, were uncertain whether it was being redeveloped for students or a wider constituency. The uncompromising green fencing around its perimeter were reminiscent of the kinds of places where refugees and asylum seekers night be housed.

Ten years earlier, 37% of the UK electorate voted for 'Brexit', and with that the opportunities for many young people in Europe – such as Alžběta Wolfová, who very kindly proposed me as a keynote speaker at the 8th CASA Biennial Conference in Pardubice, and Ema Hrešanová, another Czech Erasmus student to Durham, both of whom are now faculty members themselves – came to an end. The Covid-19 pandemic, wars in Gaza, Ukraine and Sudan, and the ending of any consensus around the postwar neoliberal political and economic agenda, have all indicated that old world orders are changing, and newly formed ones are barely discernible, and can only be anticipated – through a glass, darkly.

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8 See McKay (2025). I am grateful to my brother-in-law Graham Macnaughton for alerting me to this news story.

9 The succession of names used to denote this place during its 25-year history – Joint University College on Teesside, University College Stockton, Durham University Stockton Campus and, finally, Queen's Campus – reflect its uncertain and somewhat precarious identity vis-à-vis Durham University as a whole.

QUEEN'S CAMPUS STOCKTON

Figure 10 (a, b, c): *Stockton Campus, 2 November 2025* (photos by the author)

Where does anthropology, and higher education more generally, sit in the context of crises such as these that have characterised the past fifty years or so (Ringel 2021)? Because of – or at least, alongside – the intellectual, ethical, structural and technological changes I have highlighted, there has been a revisiting of old tropes and traditions as part of a wider 'decolonisation' debate in anthropology. As fast as some countries – or intellectual groups or institutions in our lifeworlds – seek to embrace anthropology, so others, seeing it as a discipline unable to escape its colonial legacies, propose letting 'anthropology burn'. This would be a pity, in my view. Without wanting to 'unsettle the conceptual and methodological preoccupations' of writers such as Ryan Jobson (2020) about anthropology's 'discourse of moral perfectibility founded in histories of settler colonialism and chattel slavery, liberal humanism and its anthropological register of ethnographic sentimentalism', and willing to accept these have 'proved insufficient to confront the existential threats of climate catastrophe and authoritarian retrenchment in 2019', I have reservations about taking the torch to the woodpile at this point in our history. We may feel guilt or regret about colonialism and the gains our nations have made from chattel slavery and other exploitative practices,

but guilt and regret are singularly unproductive emotions, in my experience, unless they lead to changing practice in the future.[10] At the very least, it seems to me, anthropology is one of the few disciplines with the reflexive purchase to raise such issues directly. It is also one of the few disciplines with the ability to offer insights into how best to address them rather than conveniently expunging them from human consciousness. To do better in this regard, it seems to me, should be the goal not of an ageing, decrepit anthropology but of a mature and vibrant discipline that has an enormous amount to offer the future, as well as trenchant criticisms to make of its past.[11]

I suspect Grøn and Meinertwould argue, as they do for 'time' in ageing time beings, that the term 'career' is an 'ontologically groundless' way of categorising the hotchpotch of activities – paths taken, experiences gained, routes not followed, opportunities missed – I have presented here. Yet as I approach the ranks of 'the elderly', from whom I felt such a need to distance myself in the Bexhill of the 1960s and 70s, to call such processes ontologically groundless feels like something of a provocation of the 'What would you like the facts to be?' rather than 'What are the facts?' variety (Thompson et al. 1986). On the other hand, 'career' (rather like 'ageing', and maybe time itself) makes sense ontologically only if we look back and identify what, if any, continuous threads or consistent patterns we can see across the past 50 years. The 'best of times'/'worst of times' dichotomy is reflected in the Chinese character for 'crisis', which, as well as 'danger', includes – if not 'opportunity' – at least 'new directions'.[12]

Reflecting on the joke from the 1991 ASA conference, I am acutely aware that my positionality has enabled me to be a swimmer whom the dolphins have pushed towards the shore rather than in the other direction. In the process, I would say, I eventually became an anthropologist. This account has touched on multiple themes – serendipity, ethics, the democratisation and diversification of anthropology, the importance of material technologies in shaping how and what is studied, the value both of an expansive anthropology and of digging down in one's own backyard from time to time. I wish everyone who takes a trajectory that is in any way similar to mine the best of luck in their endeavours.

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10 I note that, at the 1992 EASA conference in Prague , Luc de Heusch's keynote lecture was titled 'Maintenir l'anthropologie' – i.e. 'Maintain Anthropology', not burn it!

11 Since Jobson's article, moreover, the threat to anthropology from other political directions has become ever more apparent (Santos 2024). The time has come, it seems to me, for anthropologists to stand up and be (ac)counted!

12 I am grateful to my colleague and friend Dr Sui Ting-Kong, co-director of the Centre for Social Justice and Community Action, for explaining some of the subtleties of this Chinese character to me.

Figure 12: *The Chinese character for 'crisis'.*

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The ancestors, known and unknown, are part of the broader phenomenon of eldership in anthropology and deserve our profound respect. For me personally these include Iain Edgar (1928–2021); Edwin Ardener (1927–1987); Igor Kopytoff (1930–2013); Nick Allen (1939–2020); Wendy James (1940–2024). Malcolm Smith, another former colleague and friend and a great champion of kin and genetic research, died a few days before I delivered the paper on which this article is based in Pardubice. I dedicate it to his memory.

ChatGPT-5.2 was consulted with the following questions during the preparation of this article:

'What were the dates and programme of the EASA Biennial Conference held in Prague in 1992?'

'Can the Norman conquest of England in 1066 be regarded as an example of colonialism that has persisted to this day?'

'Has Bexhill-on-Sea (UK) ever been the town with the average oldest population of any town in Europe and, if so, when?'

'How many words of text would be in a typical 50-minute lecture?'

'When and why was the decision taken to rename the Czech Republic 'Czechia'?' [The reply was informative but didn't say anything about the pronunciation of 'Czechia' (hard 'k' sound for 'ch', not a soft 'c' sound). I am grateful to Yasar Abu Ghosh for kindly correcting my pronunciation after the lecture.]

'What is a "collective temporal register"?'

'Give a list of all the Association of Social Anthropologists conferences held in the UK, with year.' [This is the one question for which ChatGPT-5.2 could not provide a meaningful answer.]

'With reference to Jobson (2019)'s critique, rehearse the arguments for and against "letting anthropology burn".' [ChatGPT corrected the publication date but proposed explaining the error with 'hereafter "Jobson 2019"'. I have not followed this advice.]

'Where was Semtex manufactured in Pardubice?'

The above acknowledgements notwithstanding, all errors of fact and truths of fiction remain my own.

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Architectures of the Social: Anthropology, Music & Community Care[1]

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Abstract: *Policymakers often present community care as an answer to the demographic changes within an ageing Europe. This paper asks how we might understand the notion of community as different architectures of the social, meaning different constellations of social relationships. The aim is to learn how informal caring relationships may be imagined, supported, and developed. I will argue that theoretical and policy concepts that have impacted on the understanding of community in relation to aspiring 'citizens' who want to 'get in' to 'assert their rights' are problematic. I explore the notion of less governable everyday aesthetic values as an alternative to understand the formation of social ties. I will then put these insights to the test through an ethnographic study of the development of a music event. This event aimed to support the formation of social bonds in a Dutch apartment building for inhabitants over age 55. This experiment led to unexpected results that are instructive for thinking about 'architectures of the social'.*

Keywords: *older people; ethnography; community; music; inclusion*

[1] This paper is part of the research of Let's Care (2025), which takes place in seven European countries. Let's Care aims to advance EU Long-Term Care policy and practice through policy analysis and ethnographies of innovative care practices. Note that the notion of community is used in both retreating and absent welfare states as an innovation that responds to a very different situation: a lack of professional care and the support of family care respectively.

Crisis in elder care?

In European policy, 'the community' is often evoked as a key actor in solving problems in long-term care, including care for older people. In the paper, I will analyse different constellations of relationships that are hidden under the label 'community'. At the end of the paper, I introduce the notion 'architectures of the social', to provide an analytical tool that attends to the differences in relationship in a place where people live together, but where all participants engage in different relationships.

But first, some background on what seems to be the problem. When thinking about elder care, the discourse on the emerging 'care crisis' is hard to escape. In the Netherlands, the country I am writing from, and in Europe more widely, there are grave concerns about a lack of professional health care staff in relation to an increasing elderly population, with a particular concern for the increase of very old people. When looking beyond statistics, however, there are some problems with these crisis-discourses (see also Peine & Neven 2021; Aceros et al. 2015). They betray a certain idea of older people as sickly and in need of care rather than as, say, people who are also providing care.[2] Also, the assumed care crisis plays out very differently in different countries, ranging from in countries where the welfare state is retreating, versus countries where there never was a welfare state in the first place.[3]

Over the years, Dutch policy makers have alternately understood the problem of an ageing society as *either* a financial problem, *or* a problem of a lack of health care staff, tweaking their policies accordingly - and hence inconsistently (Pols 2012).[4] These Dutch policies differed from those in other European countries because they were concerned with *medical* rather than social care until recently (Mort et al. 2015; Pols 2017). Ideas about health are slowly changing in the Netherlands, towards a broader understanding of what generates a healthy life.[5] A longstanding neoliberal 'look after yourself' policy within a medically

2 Volunteer work in the Netherlands is done mostly by people aged 65 – 74 years. (52.9% of all volunteer work) see Rijksoverheid 2025.

3 Let's Care 2025.

4 In hindsight, it is amazing that people were fired when money was deemed to be the problem. For the lack of staff, the slogan was: technology will solve the problems through making care more efficient. But the tech solution also hides an economic agenda, as tech is only welcomed when industry stands to benefit. Useful low-tech solutions are simply not considered.

5 See the policy plans from the Ministry of Health under the header of 'health in all policies' and a focus on disease prevention through health promotion and care for jobs, debts, and other kinds of socio-economic inequalities. See also other policies that stimulate

focused, individualised understanding of vitality in ageing, however, often collapses health promotion into programmes engaged with inducing people to care for themselves, to 'self-manage' or even re-enablement (i.e. a (re-) learning of self-care and housekeeping skills) rather than social or structural changes.

What hinders 'community solutions', here: care that includes informal next to or instead of professional caregivers, is that health care in the Netherlands is organised in a tightly knit set of (sometimes contradictory) laws and regulations, paired with a strong professionalisation of health care workers, which provides another closely knit set of regulations. This regulatory zeal is amplified on the workfloor by the implementation of various accountability systems, and a juridical regulation of health care that substantially impacts long term care organisation (Muusse et al 2021).[6] Policy, professionalisation, and health care organisation are hence shaped along lines of regulation (law) and accountability (bureaucracy). This makes the system rigid and organised from the top down, while at the same time marginalising social care and hindering health care organisations and workers in organising care in less formalised ways.[7]

How, then, is 'community' understood in this context other than through the negative 'non-professional'? Pragmatically, community in Dutch policy is operationalised as 'family' and 'neighbourhood'. These are forms of the social that are built on family lines and physical closeness, on convention and habit rather than on management or governance. This makes such communities difficult to influence by regulation or government. The Dutch Ministry of Health seems to think that it is best to leave such socialities well alone and make individuals responsible for solving problems, by relying on them to self-manage themselves and maintain their own caring networks ('make sure to make younger friends').[8] On a more theoretical level, the question is what are these notions of community, or social ties between people, that are implicit in Dutch policy. And how may we imagine community life in a way that is conducive to local practices aspiring for a good life? I explore these questions in this paper.

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collaboration of health care organisations to join hands to work around policy restrictions (IZA and later AZWA).

6 Laws may be in place to solve problematic situations, but in the Netherlands, particularly in mental health care, they have become formative of ways to think about what care is and should be (see Pols 2003 for an example in long-term mental health care, where juridical impact is extensive (see Muusse et al. 2021).

7 See the ethnographic field reports that are forthcoming (Let's Care 2025).

8 Actiz 2025. This instrumentalisation of friendship, family, and other informal relationships is problematic, as it suggests that such relationships can be governed and regulated. But these relationships work differently, as this paper argues below.

Community of what?

I explore the notion of community and community care, first, by tracing the history of the concepts policy makers use to think about community in relation to people who need support due to handicaps or (chronic) health problems. Most prominently this was the notion of 'citizenship'. I will show how this notion sparked hope through a vision on both liberating and including people to exert their autonomy, but simultaneously understood community as 'already there', as static, unified and unproblematic. In the end, this turned out to be a rather exclusive society to which people may be invited to participate by adapting to existing norms. Second, I will explore attempts at re-imagining communities, not through ideas of rationalisation and governance, but through ideas of motivation and aesthetics. I present the concept of aesthetic values, as a set of values that refer to things that people do because they are *motivated* to do these things, because they find pleasure, meaning or good habits in them. What kind of communities could we then think of, and how may they hold together, if not by regulation? In the third part of the paper, I will put these conceptual findings ethnographically to the test.

The model of citizenship

Particularly in thinking about people in need of care, or people in disabling environments, the notion of *citizenship* has been mobilised to better their situation in the Netherlands and elsewhere.[9] This started with the idea that people who were marginalised in society needed to be included (moved to the centre), as a way of asserting and supporting their autonomy and participation. In 1984 and 1997, social philosopher Lolle Nauta showed how there were two notions of citizenship that emerged around the French Revolution in Paris: the citizen and the bourgeois.[10] They operated along different logics, yet are tied together in the history of ideas.[11]

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9 There is a vast literature in disability studies that takes this position as a starting point, see e.g. Shakespeare 2005; Imrie 2000.

10 There were differences between nations that were formed at the time, but the French Revolution is studied most widely and serves here as an exemplary situation to look at the framing of the two forms of citizenship. Hence, these ideas are developed theoretically more than empirically, even if the two hang together, as Nauta also claims with the notion of the 'exemplary situation', the empirical situation that is inscribed in even the most abstract of theories.

11 Pols 2023 (89–116) provides the analysis for the historical study quoted here.

The citizen is both a political individual and a private person. The *citoyen* became a character that aimed to exert influence through making decisions in gatherings in parliament, based on discussions where each voice was heard. The government then proclaimed laws to safeguard freedom for individuals by way of law or social contract: the *trias politica*.[12] The *citoyen* emerged together with a second type of citizen: the bourgeois. The bourgeois situated the citizens as male, rich traders (Landes 1988).[13] For the bourgeois, the free pursuit of calculated self-interest, unhindered by the state, was important. Society for the bourgeois, then, is the aggregation of individual activities that are propelled by self-interest.

Present day problems with notions of citizenship in the context of disability became clear in my ethnography of long-term mental health care in the early 2000s.[14] People with long-term mental health problems had been institutionalised in the Netherlands, often from their late teens onward. Their citizenship-to-be consisted of their moving out of institutions and 'into the community'. One of the problems with this type of discourse was the spatial metaphor of marginalisation. It pre-supposes a unified community as a central space where one can be excluded from, but can also enter. For the people *entering* the neighbourhood this could imply an isolated position, a lack of access to jobs, education and leisure activities, as well as a lack of friends. Entering a sociality defined by existing norms and autonomous individuals clearly did not do much for *integrating* newcomers on their own terms (Pols et al. 2017; Dronkert 2023).

For new relationships to emerge, a notion of relational citizenship proved helpful, moving the gaze away from the state and towards relationships between citizens and social material infrastructures.[15] Communities could then be thought of as the creation of relationships between people, places and institutions (or other materialities) (Ootes 2012). This implies a re-invention and a re-shaping of norms on how to live together, a creation of norms and socialities in which *all* partners take part. Difference, then, becomes part of interactions and can

12 The idea of the social contract is that individuals give up some of their freedom to delegate it to the state. The monopoly on the use of violence is the clear example. The idea was first used and developed by Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The *trias politica* was developed by Montesquieu.

13 Notwithstanding the universalist style of thinking and speaking, Joan Landes shows how these citizens were a very particular type of rich male traders (rather than peasants). Ever since, the usefulness of universalist claims has been debated (is this discourse biased anyway, or should we merely extend the citizenry to include women, poor people, peasants, and so on? Jürgen Habermas is the clearest proponent of the latter strategy, with feminists and Foucauldians being on the critical side of the debate.

14 See, e.g., Pols 2006; 2016.

15 Thelen & Coe 2019 argue something similar by using the notion of 'belonging'.

be negotiated to make certain activities and newcomers 'normally different', i.e. different, but acceptable to the interaction parties, as Myriam Winance (2007) called it.[16] Rather than gaining access to a predefined and exclusive community, looking at citizenship in terms of becoming related to others and embedded in socio-material practices provides a more dynamic and creative ethnographic understanding of the formation of social ties.[17] The notion of community as the sum of the activities of the autonomous individuals, then, emerges as problematic, as too uniform, too static, and too exclusive.

The everyday aesthetics of social relationships

The notion of relational citizenship fragments a stabilised or 'whole' community, and instead studies the formation of relationships in action, on the ground. But how to think of the resulting unregulated socialities? How may we discern these smaller, less coherent social networks or arrangements? I suggest that the notion of aesthetic values is instructive here.[18] Even though individual passions became suspect in the 17th century, individuals do find (or create) value in and through the concrete practices they engage in (Hennion 2003; 2007). These may be moral considerations (what ought I do in this situation?), but also aesthetic motivations that are shared with others (Meijer 2009; Meijer & Verrips 2008). Aesthetic values refer to what people find of beauty, find nice, pleasant, or appropriate. People (and other species) pursue aesthetic values not for rational reasons or gain, but because they *appreciate* certain things and *want* to engage with them. Such values, Luc Boltanski (2012) argues, escape rational argumentation, reasoning, or utility calculations to maximise gain. They are about love, desire, friendship, or altruism.[19]

Aesthetic values within the modernist terminology of autonomous citizenship are framed as matters of taste. Taste in this context is a private matter. It cannot be disputed, as the Dutch saying goes. It cannot be argued or reasoned for one simply likes some things rather than others. However, this linking of aesthetic values to individual taste made the 'social life' of aesthetic values as formative

16 Winance's argument was that in more Goffman oriented understandings of norms and stigma, the norms are solid and pregiven. With an ethnographic understanding of how people together also create new norms, she breaks open this solidity. What is illustrative is her example of the man missing a right hand. After several meetings with him, it becomes 'normally different' to shake his left hand as a greeting.

17 Pols 206; 2016.

18 See Pols 2013; 2017 and other papers on dignity; and a full development of the term in Pols 2023.

19 Aesthetic activities like the Arts are, however, often forced into neoliberal logics.

social values invisible. In the widest sense, such aesthetic socialities can be understood as culture (small c) and Culture (capital c).

From my study into a clearly aesthetic concern, of women confronted with hair loss after chemotherapy for cancer, I learned that the aesthetic problem of feminine baldness was foremost a social problem. The perception of bald women is mediated by strong cultural and historical conceptions and events. These are embedded in culture understandings more widely, but are also fragile, in the sense that people have different cultural experiences. For instance, associations between baldness and World War II were less strong for younger generations, or were absent for people coming in from different parts of the world where they were educated to relate to their own particular historical moral and aesthetic atrocities or locally canonised forms of beauty.

Nevertheless, the formative potential of aesthetic appreciations for social life cannot be underestimated. Aesthetic appreciations can lead to the linking of niche cultural interests, such as collectors of stamps, or of larger social phenomena, such as soccer or jazz lovers, or to cultures and practices that are formative of national styles of doing things, such as hippy culture or religions. Such socialities are not based on regulations or economic gain, and may emerge at a distance, between people who do not know each other, but share concerns and things they find important. Aesthetic socialities, then, are outside the realm of governance, rationalisation, or gain, but are important drivers for social practices and social ties.[20] As such, they are useful for understanding informal socialities such as the ones envisioned with the notion of 'caring communities'.

Aesthetics and care for social life

From this brief history of citizenship and aesthetic relationships, I can extract the following insights in relation to thinking about care for older people in informal, aesthetic relationships, next to family or neighbourhood. First, such aesthetic relationships are held together by a certain symmetry and motivation, where actors find pleasure in something they both find important. People contribute to the practices they are motivated to support because it provides them with experiences they value. This does not need a dyadic or directly reciprocal understanding of relationships: such reciprocities can be dispersed over different relationships, or

[20] See Anthony Kwame Appiah 2011. 'Honour' is a form of aesthetic that, Appiah argues, had been crucial for the abolishing of slavery or feet binding, where the rational and moral arguments against these practices were well known at the time. Things being 'not done' have more impact than Reason.

over distances (such as in digital communication forms, or as a remote stamp collector).

Consequently, aesthetic activities can engage a variety of actors, as long as they contribute to what participants find a good life. This opens the possibility to look at different public sector actors when thinking about community care, such as social workers, teachers and artists as meaningful partners. They all provide matters that are of value to people.[21] These relationships that are based on shared aesthetic values or motivations hardly take the form of units or coherent 'wholes'. They may consist of a variety of relationships around a variety of values. Indeed, one taste does not fit all, or rather, one taste does not engage everyone.

Table 1. Characteristics of aesthetic socialities

• Relationships 'in the making' rather than given.
• Dispersed reciprocity (everybody needs care, but not necessarily from the person cared for)
• Activities pertaining to a locally defined understanding of a good life (motivating events)
• New (public sector) actors (like teachers, volunteers, researchers, artists) in care for a 'good life' (not only a healthy life)
• Diversity of roles and expressions of a good life

Putting aesthetic relationships to the test

With these theoretical and empirical insights, I will now turn to an analysis of a concrete initiative in the Netherlands where 'community building' was a goal set by a care organisation (I call it Robinson) for an apartment building with 120 apartments and around 150 inhabitants. Robinson had some rough times in its organisation, but hired a manager occupied with the task of creating a form of caring community called 'Omzien naar elkaar' ('Looking out for each other'). The idea was to turn The Appletree into a caring space where people would keep an eye on each other and help out with little tasks or needs. Robinson also aimed to include older people from the neighbourhood.

[21] For professional caregivers, rationalisation and professionalisation have also reached their limits, with many of them leaving health care for lack of recognition, burdensome work pressures and moral distress. Even if proper financial reward is important, the frustration in knowing what is good to do but being prevented from doing it (moral distress) by regulation and accountability systems is hard to live with.

This is where our research came in. We were eager to learn about community building and to explore if and how we might support this work with artistic means. Was it possible to actually support the new social relationships if these cannot be governed but have to develop through motivations? How? We conferred first with the active inhabitants, often members of the 'board of inhabitants'. They made it clear that the majority of inhabitants did not participate in the activities organised by them (about 50 of the 150 inhabitants show up). The board of inhabitants wanted to create a more tightly knit community, a goal they hence shared with the care organisation. With our action-research/music project we wanted to learn how a music event might contribute to building social ties in The Appletree. Our rough idea was to use music as a way to connect people or at least bring them together, allowing them the chance to meet.

Ethnographic methodology and positionality

We conducted fieldwork with an action research intent that centred around a musical intervention. There were 4 ethnographers involved; it proved impossible to co-organise events and observe at the same time, at least not in the limited time frame we had (the project was running for 3 months).[22] Professional musicians took part.[23] They were musicians who were interested in participating in musical contributions in care, and who could perform a broad range of musical styles. JP designed the idea together with two of the musicians and in conversation with the representatives of the active inhabitants (in the first round), through a door-to-door musical inquiry to also reach the inhabitants that were not active or were not represented by the board (second round), and through written requests for contributions (announcement in the newsletter, a letter to individual inhabitants through their letterbox that also informed them about the project).

The collaboration with the artists proved to be a challenge in itself. At different points in time, it was unclear who was in the lead with what activities. This collaboration between cultures of research and artistic activities is worth a study in itself, but that is beyond the scope of this paper. We eventually decided on a Poetry-Music Evening dubbed 'Salt on your skin'. In our case, we wanted to provide music different from what is usually available in The Appletree, as I will

[22] Next to the author Kristine Krause, Anne Loo, and Siënna Hernandez participated, whereas Sarah Oehlman observed creative projects and music on a different care location. Lot Heeremans conducted fieldwork for her MA thesis in anthropology here.

[23] Philipp Rüttgers (piano), Luca Warmer (voice), Oene van Geel (viola) and Remco Menting (drums and percussion).

explain in more detail below. In this way, we hoped to attract inhabitants who would not otherwise engage in shared activities. The musicians were responsible for the final performance and set list, which they decided on in relation to the requests received and their own intuitions. We observed all events and wrote fieldnotes that we collected and analysed together. There were no disagreements on the interpretation of the events.

I wrote the ethnographic part of the paper by describing the process of how our research-and-intervention emerged, showing how our positionality shifted from a rather naïve idea that we might be able to support the building of relationships through our action research. The reader will see how this idea shifted and what our events eventually brought out. The project was part of a larger research EU project (Let's Care) that was approved by our Ethics Advisory Board, and did not involve risks for participants. However, I believe the ethical concerns in ethnographic research are ongoing and emergent, and hence I take them to be explicitly part of the process, rather than present them as 'cleared' at the beginning of the research.

One of the main concerns during the research was the question 'who could speak for the inhabitants.' This question was clear from the start, but it was not solved, as clearly some inhabitants had a voice (the active inhabitants) and others did not (they did not come to the shared events and did not respond to our requests to collaborate). The idea of an artistic intervention formed a means to attract inhabitants with different backgrounds, and this succeeded at least partially. One of our main findings was that the variety among inhabitants was even wider than we had expected. This was confirmed by a student doing her anthropology master's thesis fieldwork at The Appletree some months later: there were people who explicitly did not want to engage in common activities (for various reasons) and who relied on their own networks. Even so, there are inhabitants who live an isolated life and who are not part of the study.

The Appletree: different kinds of fruit

The Appletree is part of a small village attached to a harbour town in the north of the Netherlands. People can rent an apartment in The Appletree if they are 55+ and have an indication for care, mostly home care. This can be any form of care, ranging from domestic work to wound care to assisted living issues. Care organisation Robinson manages the care and negotiates access to the apartments with the owner of the building (a housing organisation) which is also responsible for the maintenance of the building. There are three floors, the apartments on the ground floor have little gardens and each has its own private front door.

The upper two floors can be accessed through a main entrance and through the restaurant, by pressing the bell for an individual apartment or by entering the restaurant. There is no shared maintenance of the living spaces by the inhabitants, apart from active members of the 'board of inhabitants' who look after the inner communal gardens, which form the attractiveness of the building and are a place to 'hang out'.

> *Fieldnote-impression Anne: The atmosphere of the building I find closed. Long dark stone corridors lead to apartments that are separate from the shared spaces. Although there are central spaces to meet, they do not seem to be very inviting. The possibilities for chance meetings are few. The physical layout has few sightlines, informal corners or open transition zones, and hence affords few spontaneous interactions or casual meetings. The garden and balconies do make this possible, if the weather allows. It seems social meet-ups emerge when organised rather than spontaneously.*

Access for the ethnographers and musicians was an instructive thing, as it became clear that no unit or homogeneous community called The Appletree exists. There are the individual apartments, with their inhabitants with individual care needs,[24] and there is the active group of inhabitants. We did not know about the other inhabitants. There is no reception desk. The individualised living arrangements made access to the building more difficult. We were formally granted access through the manager, but this did not mean we could simply access the building physically. We eventually managed access through individual inhabitants who helped us. This is a telling situation: The Appletree in no way resembled the caring community that it was envisioned to become.

Fieldwork in The Appletree: Preparations

In our (fieldworker and 2 musicians) first meeting with the active group of inhabitants, it became clear that this group had a very particular idea of what kind of activities were helpful, and how they should be conducted. The core of the activities is the 'Friaftdri' (Friday afternoon drinks, 'Vrijmibo'), which became a concept in itself, representing the pleasures of these get-togethers. The Friaftdri's were described as a lot of fun, with festive music being played by the local dj, Mrs Moreno, proud owner of supposedly 17,000 records, and a musician herself. The Friafdri starts with local humpa music, which puts everyone present in

[24] Dutch health care is organised in a highly individualised way.

the mood. 'Humpa music' is a kind of carnivalesque song, with a simple structure, tickling the dancing muscles for movement in no choreography other than stepping through the space in a line where one person puts their hands on the shoulders of the one before them. Carnival is a celebration that is popular in the Catholic South of the Netherlands but finds its way into unreligious local folklore and Catholic enclaves up north. Another example is the 'anthem' of the village, which is a song about drinking.

In the meeting, it became clear that the active inhabitants felt that the absent majority also needed to be part of the activities. They felt that they miss out on the fun if they don't attend. But as a fieldworker I also sensed an implicit demand or obligation to participate, as well as a clear and particular set of norms on what is enjoyable.

> *Frannie [inhabitant] says that many people don't leave their apartment. It is always the same people who show up. This is not good. Our singer suggests: maybe we should go to them? There is a newsletter where activities are announced, Franny says. But still the people do not come. One lady of 96 visits all the newcomers. But still they don't come for the activities. [..] Hanny says it is typical for the region: first wait and see, to learn what's up ['de kat uit de boom kijken']. They did get a different crowd for liberation day. But there are so many other things to do: bingo, movies, playing cards, listening to music, even classical music, knitting, physical exercise... But people do not show up.*
>
> *This discussion goes on for a while, and at a certain point I say: It sounds a bit as if you are* angry *at the people who do not come. This stirs some commotion. One lady says eventually that they find it sad for the organisers if nobody shows up. Another says that they enjoy the activities so much themselves. It can be so gezellig [cosy], and the others all miss out on that.*
>
> *My note afterwards: It is all happiness and cheer and a joyful mess. It could be that newcomers do not particularly like that this type of get-together. It feels somewhat obligatory, all the fun it should be, and how it should be about fun and not about other emotions. Sensitive issues are avoided and are cut short with critical remarks. We learned later that this is part of the local social style.*

In the following meeting with the musicians, we discussed our findings. We talked about a type of event that is a bit outside of what is already there, with a different mood to it, to attract these no-show-people: a music poetry night. We chose the title 'Salt on your skin', to avoid the feeling of all-is-happiness. From my notes: [salt on your skin] *hurts a little and is also a bit nice, it is outside by the sea, linking to the harbour nearby.* The idea was to work from stories people

tell about their life, and relate to music that they like or that raises memories of important things they experienced in their lives.

We would put a call in the newsletter, send out a flyer, and we organised a door-to-door musical event (singing and violin play) in order to open the closed doors and ask people for their stories and preferences. A second idea came from the singer: she would create a 'pass-on box'. The singer wrote the text and recorded 'The Appletree-song' together with the pianist.[25] The song plays when you open the box. We sent it by mail to 'the inhabitants of the Appletree', with instruction on how to pass it on and recharge the battery if needed. The singer also designed an attractive flyer (with a picture of an open hand of each musician, with their instrument in the background, as an inviting gesture or reaching out) that we would hand out at the door-to-door event.

Door-to-door event

We planned to put the flyers in peoples' mailboxes, but our contact had already, thankfully, done this for us when we arrived for the door-to-door event. Here is a vignette from poetic ethnographer Anne, merged with my own notes, on the door-to-door event:

> *All is quiet at The Appletree. The corridors are dimly lighted, still, as if the building has withdrawn in the silence of the warm afternoon. Our footsteps echo lightly while we move to a common room with tables and a small kitchen, with glass walls overlooking the deserted inner garden. When we go out and the first sounds of song and violin strike, the sound hits the walls, touches the leaves, and follows the stone paths. One inhabitant comes out to the garden in his wheelchair. A small private session is his reward. I can see that he greatly appreciates the music, his banter falls silent and his body becomes tense and still when he listens intently.*
>
> *More people gather, and there is some playing in the garden near the common space. There are some tables and chairs to sit, as well as some benches. One man observes from his own little garden. 'He will not come', one of the other inhabitants comments. 'He is too shy'.*
>
> *Most doors remain closed. Some people hurry away to appointments. Behind the windows, there are shadows, maybe presence, quiet. The playing and singing continue to fill the corridors of the inner building as we enter with a small*

[25] A beautiful song with music from the jazz standard 'Infant Eyes' from Wyne Shorter listen here: Warmer & Rüttgers, 2025.

Picture 1:
Pass-on-box
(Photo: Luca Warmer)

group of enthusiasts. Sometimes a head emerges through a door opened a crack. Curious, interpellated. But mostly the doors stay shut. The 'shy man' comes out for a chat after all, but he does not want to visit the music-poetry evening, even if he says he likes the music. There is football on the TV.

And then something special happens when we enter the second-floor gallery doors open: stories are being told, about singing in choirs, folksongs on birthdays, trumpet sounds in the marine, memories of Amsterdam neighbourhoods, magical concerts of André Rieu, festive nights in concert halls, the seductive rhythms of the tango. Not everyone responds to the invitation for the concert, but we share a story with everyone we speak to: the love for music, the power of memories and the emotion that comes with that.

I speak with a man in his fifties, who says he lives here because of the nice, large apartment. He does not share in the activities here; he does not want to. He has his own life in the cultural scene of the neighbouring town. He evades saying if he will come for the music-poetry evening, but I guess it's a no.

We end in the garden again, with a small group of the active inhabitants. They get a last couple of songs. Some sway with the music, others close their eyes. The benches face the other direction, so some sit with their back to the musicians. They enjoy the music together, but also everyone in their own way.

Picture 2:
Door-to-door music at The Appletree
Photo: Author of the text

A reflection from Anne afterwards:

> *What happened this afternoon was not a great shared event, but a mosaic of small moments: a melody that catches someone's attention, a memory retrieved, a door opened a crack. Not everyone came to watch, but maybe that is ok. Because of the hesitant looks, the soft humming (maybe also behind closed doors), and the spontaneous stories that came up showed; music presents an opening. Not for everyone in the same way, but the multitude of responses, from singing along loudly until quietly listening from a door opening, shows how the music creates space for things to emerge, for meetings, for memories, for being moved in a way that is hard to put into words.*

In the days between the door-to-door and the concert, it becomes clear that our sending of the pass-on-box to 'the inhabitants of The Appletree' was meant to appeal to some form of togetherness that did not demand physical co-presence. However, we immediately lost track of the box and we did not know where it was, even if it arrived well. Later, at the concert night, it turned out that the box *was* indeed travelling. But this was an intervention we could not study well; it happened between people and out of sight for the ethnographers…

Meanwhile, the call for stories was published and led to two responses over the telephone: one by (free) mail, one by email. During the preparation rehearsal, the musicians decided on a repertoire that included some improvisations, but mainly stayed close to songs everybody would know.

The music poetry evening

The music poetry evening itself took place on a warm evening in early July 2025. About 35 people visited, some in their good dresses, and the visitors started trickling in about an hour before the concert started. Volunteers served coffee and cookies, and later drinks and snacks. The food and drinks formed an integral part of the festive experience.

> *Fieldnotes from Kristine, Siënna, and me: From 18.30 on, people come into the garden, seating themselves in the provisionally organised semi-circle of chairs we put together. There are cards on the chairs for people to respond after the concert. More people come in when hearing the sound check. One gentleman comes with a mouth organ, later joined by another gentleman with the same instrument. They play in two voices, solemnly and quite softly. Later, they get an interlude in the music programme, as it seems fitting with the idea of bringing in personal backgrounds and stories. One of the men cracks a joke about classical composers, which may have performed a class difference with the other audience members.*[26] *This performance, however, is not responded to well by all. One lady responds angrily to that, and says: 'I take the dog inside! She says something like: 'It is terrible, unbearable!', which is quite a mismatch with our preconceived ideas. When I ask her later, she tells me the players hit their mouth organ every coffee break. She thinks it's too noisy, and very annoying. A man says*: *"I already hear them every day. In the coffee hours, they are always whining on these things." He says it is difficult to have a conversation when they do that.*

But I am running ahead of the story. These overt fights, we learned later, were very much part of the ordinary conversations here. What appeared to us outsiders as harsh comments did not lead to permanent fights, as conversations restarted the next day. 'This is how we do it. You have to live together.', one lady commented later.

[26] See Bourdieu 1984 for how class and aesthetic taste hang together.

Picture 3: *Concert at the Apletree* (Photo: Author of the text)

There are people from the neighbourhood, so that mission from Robinson seems to be accomplished. The volunteer says: "It is pretty busy! Gezellig!" The volunteers helped to estimate the number of chairs to put out, a local knowledge that came in handy. 'Ah, nice, in the garden!' people comment.

When the concert is in full swing, we see people listening at their door, through their open window, or on the balconies, but they do not join the gathering. I see hands waving and faces watching through different windows. The dj/musician is ill this evening, so she cannot join. Later in the evening I also see an active inhabitant slip back in, apparently she had not been part of the festivities we had prepared and discussed with her.

The lady to my left has a glamorously decorated walking aid. She comments on the situation all the time. The comments do not seem all nice, but I cannot hear or understand everything. They could also be 'Nordic humour'. To my right, there are some ladies with rollators in front of them. They use these for their tea glasses. Next to me is a very quiet lady, her face does not show many responses. Next to her a smartly dressed lady with pink shoes, blouse and lipstick. Behind me, two more rows of chairs, with a more active group of people. From my right I hear more sounds, people talk and sing along. Next to Siënna sits a guy who makes many comments, but also sings along. (Siënna notes: My neighbour says: I don't sing along! I need a drink for that. But sneakily I hear him sing along, and he drums with his hands to the music.) The lady next to me says she wants the band to come back more often. She clearly enjoys herself and dances in her chair and sings along the whole evening.

One of the highlights is a song sent in by a neighbourhood lady. It is a text written by her daughter who died at a young age from cancer, and arranged in a simple chord scheme (one of the musicians frowns upon the melody). The mother is very happy with the performance and there must be more people aware of the story, as the concentration[27] *makes you able to hear a pin drop.*

The performance is interrupted by the project manager after 4 or 5 songs. She says it is time for drinks. This was not planned, but seems to reflect the habits of the place, as well as the attention span of the audience members. People go in to get sweaters, as it is getting colder, and enjoy their break and chat. After the drinks and bites the concert continues, and people sing along with a popular waltz. I notice people comment a lot, whispers that sound critical, but one cannot hear the words clearly, only suspect the content from the tone. This is the common way of doing things here. But it does create some dissonance or forbiddingness in the atmosphere: doe maar gewoon [behave normally, that is mad enough in itself, as the Dutch saying goes].

The singer presents a poem she wrote about the Appletree, reflecting on her experiences. She thanks the inhabitants for the warm welcome but also mildly rebukes less friendly encounters. Then one humpa carnival song, and a 'not too wild' jazz improvisation. The concert ends with a thank you from a Robinson representative, who tells how Robinson made all this possible, and how they hope for 'saamhorigheid' [a feeling of togetherness] at the Appletree.

Then drinks are served inside, donated by Robinson. Some people fill out the cards for us with happy feedback. There is some chatter in the garden with the singer. One lady is elated by the singer's youth and spirit. A woman brings out the pass-on-box and passes it on. ['A weight off my shoulders', the singer says. 'It's not that heavy', the lady comments.]

Fieldnote from Kristine:

I enjoyed the music tremendously during the concert. I experienced a sense of happiness to be in this beautiful garden, surrounded by green and a blue sky. Two seagulls fly past. Protected by the apartments it feels very private, but also joyful and privileged. The combination of being surrounded, but with the large empty space of the garden and the wide blue sky feels special. The different types of chairs make it private, but the ladies walking around and offering nice foods (lots of sausage) and drinks make it festive and chic, the feeling that you are the guest of something privileged.

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[27] I learned that 'concentration' and participation are ways of observing an audience appreciation of music, see the note below on the difficulty of observing music events.

It is difficult after the events to describe the general mood: even the mood seems to be fragmented. The atmosphere created by the music adds to this, see this reflection in the fieldnotes from Kristine:

> *during the writing of these notes I realised that I find it difficult to write them, I hardly took notes about the songs, but the different songs were of course the main actors in this. They changed the mood, the way of engagement. Interesting question: how to note down something which happens with music as one of the main actors?*

It is difficult to observe while music is playing, it is difficult to bracket the music or one's own experience of it.

Afterparty

In the chats after the event with the three ethnographers, one lady commented that people from the neighbourhood take the place of inhabitants from the Appletree: *I live in The Appletree, but I cannot go to the movement activities, because someone from the neighbourhood was there before me. It is not fair! I need to exercise for my health, but then I cannot go!* The presence of people from the neighbourhood hence turns out to be not uncontested. On the other hand, during the concert the singer asked if there are people from outside in the audience, and they were greeted by applause. There is clearly no consensus on the policy for turning The Appletree into a caring community that includes the neighbourhood.

One person from the board of inhabitants says they do not want the Appletree to be "a social centre for the neighbourhood. The shared spaces are decorated and maintained by the board, it is ours, not for the whole neighbourhood."

But also some internal tensions emerged that we had not been aware of. An inhabitant told us that they were discussing if a person with mental health issues should be allowed to live here. She makes too much noise, does not clean, and closes the curtains to the world. The Board is critical about it: we cannot handle that behaviour here. Same as with people with dementia. They would not fit.

Hence, in the event, new differences came to light, showing even more fine-grained divisions than the mere opposition between active and inactive inhabitants. The board of inhabitants is an important driver from inside the Appletree, but their representation of the inhabitants is partial, and their standpoints apparently are not the same as Robinson's policy. So, what are social arrangements here?

The evaluation with the musicians also brought some interesting observations: to them it was very odd that people requested songs they could play. That is very uncommon for the artistic performances they normally engage in, where the artists carefully compose the set. Furthermore, they said that they held back from improvisations or 'wild music'. After some reflection they added that they felt uneasy about not playing the taste of the 'older people', whom they were used to 'showing respect' from their cultural backgrounds. Respect meant taking care that the older people were looked after and attended to. In the Netherlands, this showing of respect may also reflect a segregation of the generations that is common, where respect can also come to mean 'social distance'. This can also lead to an isolation of older people rather than to extra care. The tension about 'not too wild' music and music for people with a 'different taste' for music compared to the musical events on offer, formed one of the ironies of our experiment.

To conclude this story, the ethnographic harvest of the music event seemed to be, rather than a unifying happening, a bringing together of different groups of people that were characterised by even more differences than we eventually thought. There were more 'factions' and oppositions than we had thought based on our first visit and our discussions with the manager and the active inhabitants. Not only were there active and inactive inhabitants, there were differences between neighbourhood and inside people; there were independents with clearly differing tastes; there were shy people, participating at a distance; there were dominant and non-dominant people; approved of and despised musical talents; people sharing a household and people embedded in families, singles, people with unconventional behaviour, and differing standpoints between the board and the organisation. Our musical event, then, turned out to have been a *methodological device* for assembling these different moods and hues, allowing us to take stock of the very different entry-points and understandings of 'proper' sociality for everyone present.

Discussion

What have we learned from this event about community care? In the theoretical section of the paper, it was already clear that communities are hardly the unified and regulated wholes that exist out there, waiting for people to take part by adapting to their norms.[28] Social relations need to be created and main-

[28] For lovers of theory: John Law (2009) and Chung Lin Kwa (20080 call this a romantic idea of collectivities, and point to it as a basis for this romanticism in statistics, where individual numbers contribute to an aggregate score that represents a 'whole'. The alternative they propose is the baroque collectivity that is not adding up to a whole, but remains fragmented.

tained, and emerge on lines that are contingent on contacts between individuals. Material and social infrastructures can form a supportive foundation (Muusse et al. 2020), but do not predict how socialities will evolve. However, socio-material infrastructures were lacking in the Appletree. Most of the inhabitants were not living in The Appletree because they were looking for company or support from their neighbours. They came to find a space to live, and brought their individual care arrangements and relational networks - or lack thereof. This understanding of the Appletree as foremost a space to live is preluded on in the organisation's recruitment strategy, which is based on the rent of a place next to a care need. The policy background to this is a discussion in the Netherlands about separating care and living arrangements, with an ideal of 'ageing-proof housing' on the horizon, making it unnecessary to move once settled. But this is a very different ideal than the caring community ideal, and it is difficult to bridge the two, as they centre the individual and the social respectively.

In a multigenerational housing in Innsbruck, we visited with the Let's Care Consortium (see footnote 1), an infrastructure towards the creation of a community was in place. There was an interview for aspiring inhabitants which made it clear that living there would also mean involving with the collective. Ways to do this were open for negotiation, but this expectation was clearly managed from the start, providing a very different entry point. Moreover, in Innsbruck there was a full-time social worker present to manage relationships between inhabitants. Such a social worker at Appletree would have done a lot of good to negotiate the myriad small tensions between different 'groups' of inhabitants. There are many little things ('gedoe', as a Dutch social worker called it) that hinder productive ways of living together. People do not start with the same expectations, develop their likes and dislikes, and the organisation has yet different ideas. The Appletree habit of deadpan but indisputable critical comments certainly does not help to make it a social environment that is easy to navigate for the insecure, whereas the implicit norms for what constitutes 'fun' of the active inhabitants does not leave much room for differing aesthetic repertoires.

The advantage of multigenerational housing projects, we learned in Innsbruck, was that people have different roles to fulfil for one another: one could be a grandparent, provide homework help and babysit for the children. Others could do the odd job for an elderly neighbour or run to the shops for a forgotten packet of coffee beans. Elderly inhabitants reported a meaningful role and position in their shared housing accommodation. Alternatively, in a socially managed co-housing project for older people in Italy, more symmetrical relationships emerged, such as friendships or being a good neighbour for one another.

In terms of care this teaches us that one may receive care from one person who finds it important to provide it, but who receives care from another motivated person in turn: dispersed reciprocity. 'Care' here may consist of any activity of giving and receiving that the actors perceive as being part of a good life, which motivates them to pursue these values. A good life in the aesthetic sense of the term implies that both elements (caring and being cared for) are present, while the form is up for negotiation and is not static. Alternatively, the ethnography in a co-housing project in Italy showed the emergence of clusters of more symmetrical relationships due to comparable age, such as friendships or being a good neighbour (Pasian & DaRoit, forthcoming). A pro-active management and an infrastructure supporting this sociality was in place. Caring and being cared for, then, emerged in more directly reciprocal relationships. In all cases, where bonds emerged was hard to predict, as it was dependent on the individuals participating – or not.

Informal care needs motivations that can be supported to flourish by attempts at regulation or the management and maintenance of expectations and opportunities, while taking into account that such relationships need to be built and developed in unpredictable ways. Because such relationships are built on peoples' motivations, informal care for family members needs to be balanced with care for the caregiver in order for caregiving and receiving to remain motivating and meaningful. Volunteer work can be a fruitful model here, but also the more symmetrical relationships of friendship or less symmetrical family relationships.

Conclusion: architectures of the social

Communities do not exist 'out there', and do not emerge out of convenience for care organisations or policymakers. They need material and social infrastructures, maintenance, motivations and shared expectations, and above all: maintenance, repair, and innovation work. Roles for people living in a community building may differ, and hence provide different possibilities for social interaction. Some coordination and maintenance, traditionally the expertise of social work, provides important support for social life to flourish. This support is needed for the bridging of differences, to solve smaller or larger tensions, and to prevent differences leading to isolation (in neighbourhoods) rather than integration, as is well documented. The policy idea of 'looking out for one another' by providing care or services turns out to be a bit too eagerly instrumental, and glosses over the (aesthetic) motivations needed for the creation of social life. There are many things that factor into the possibility of working and caring together, some of which are difficult to 'manage', such as friendships, aesthetic similarities and understandings of what is pleasurable to do. Possibilities for inclusion can simultaneously

be ever so many possibilities for exclusion, and these processes deserve careful consideration and coordination of services (whom to grant access, and if not here, where might people go?).

One suggestion from our study is to spend more research on and invest more analysis into various 'architectures of the social'[29] to figure out how caring relationships emerge and how they may be developed while acknowledging their aesthetic motivational basis. The possibility for 'dividing caring tasks' over varied networks also deserves more attention, for instance, to learn how relationships over physical distance may be supported (e.g., by creating digital networks based on mutual interest and friendship, see Thygesen & Pols 2016; Pols 2014). If 'community care' is to be an answer to the shortage of staff, different forms of the social are well worth looking into. Richer understandings of 'architectures of the social' may inspire collaborations between new and different actors in care for what people think of as a good life.

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[29] The metaphor denotes the results of ongoing co-creative building processes, rather than a polished vision of a designer.

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Web links

Actiz 2025: https://www.actiz.nl/actueel/minister-helder-erkent-urgentie-om-zorg-voor-ouderen-anders-te-organiseren
Let's Care 2025: https://www.lets-care-hub.eu/
Rijksoverheid 19-06-2025: https://www.vzinfo.nl/participatie/vrijwilligerswerk#:~:text=De%20helft%20van%20de%20Nederlanders,vrijwilligerswerk%20deed%20was%20vrijwel%20gelijk.
Ministry of Health 2025: https://open.overheid.nl/documenten/f0a3eb6a-ca4c-4c79-b02c-4f050bb561c0/file
Luca Warmer & Philipp Rüttgers (2025): https://vimeo.com/1163574577/ad6ad1b846?share=copy&fl=sv&fe=ci

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Technological Singularity
The Cybercultural Myth of the Human Future

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Abstract: *In contemporary discourse, technological singularity has established itself as a hypothetical turning point leading to the emergence of superintelligence, but also as a significant cultural narrative shaping our collective imagination. This text interprets the phenomenon through an interdisciplinary analysis as a cybercultural myth that updates traditional eschatological notions of salvation and the transcendence of humanity toward the emergence of a posthuman entity. Against the backdrop of transhumanist philosophy, singularity is examined as a liminal zone in which the boundaries between human and technology, between science and faith, dissolve. The aim of this paper is to show that the controversial narrative of singularity does not merely speak of a possible technological future for humanity, but above all of contemporary conceptions of human existence and its potential transcendence toward immortality.*

Keywords: *technological singularity; transhumanism; superintelligence; metahuman; cyberculture; eschatologcal myth; quasi-religion; cybersalvation; virtual immortality*

Introduction

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, technological singularity has established itself as one of the most influential cultural narratives, even though it is presented primarily as a technological prediction of the future. It is precisely this reduction that leads to the phenomenon being largely sidelined in the humanities and social

sciences. This text attempts to fill that gap by analysing singularity as a significant cybercultural myth, reflecting a deeper spiritual inquiry into the nature of the human being in a technologically globalised world.

The concept of technological singularity (or simply singularity) is today broadly understood as a hypothetical turning point on the event horizon, at which highly advanced artificial intelligence (AI) would surpass all cognitive and intellectual capacities of the human being and begin to develop autonomously on its own. This would inevitably trigger a process of radical transformation of human society. Singularity thus represents not only a fundamental technological milestone, but also a significant socio-cultural scenario (or set of scenarios) evoking collective visions of an irreversible transformation of the human and calling into question human identity as we have known it until now.

The aim of this paper is to reflect upon and attempt to answer a crucial question: is singularity merely an attempt to predict future technological development, or can it be understood as a new eschatological myth about the transformation of the human into a qualitatively different kind of being? We will further ask: what does singularity reveal, from an anthropological perspective, about contemporary human beings and their cultural imagination? Can singularity be interpreted as a new form of quasi-religion, or is it rather an ideological pretext used by tech elites to legitimise their ambitions for power?

Following a brief excursus into the history of the concept of *"technological singularity"*, the text turns to its analysis as a cultural narrative shaping the symbolic imagination of the contemporary world, before concluding with an attempt to answer questions about the function this narrative performs in today's social discourse. Although we are immediately confronted with a fundamental epistemological problem — whether we can think at all about a state of singularity that supposedly exceeds the existing possibilities of human thought — let us nonetheless attempt, if briefly, to grapple with this phenomenon.[1]

The study is conceived as an interdisciplinary analysis in the form of a critical essay, drawing primarily on approaches from digital anthropology with an overlap into religious studies, with a focus on the study of cyberculture,[2] which has

[1] This research builds on last year's intermedial exhibition *AI ORACULUM – The Future Is Now!* at the EPO1 gallery in Trutnov, organised by the art group HOMO_DIGITALIS_3.2.1, of which the author is a member. The topic of technological singularity was addressed in a popular science format in an article for the magazine *Reflex* (Mareš 2025).

[2] I use the term cyberculture in its broadest sense, as the socio-cultural activity of people moving within the shared virtual environment of cyberspace, not merely as the activity of internet subcultures, as I attempted to define it in my book *Kyberkultura, hackeři a digitální revoluce* (2022).

long been the author's principal research interest. Theoretically, the text builds loosely on Noble's *The Religion of Technology* (1999), Davis's *TechGnosis* (1998), Geraci's *Apocalyptic AI* (2010), and Krüger's *Virtual Immortality* (2021), works that have systematically linked technological discourse with religious imagination; it also draws on Stiegler's reflection on technology (1998), in which technology is not a mere instrument but the very condition of human existence, through which human culture is shaped and simultaneously undone. The study further engages with the classical anthropological concepts of liminality (Turner 1969) and binary oppositions (Lévi-Strauss 1963), as well as mythological motifs of salvation, death, and rebirth (Eliade 1954, 1957), interpreted here in the context of the contemporary digital era — **the cybercene**.[3]

In preparing this text, I have experimentally employed, within the framework of Digital Humanities, contemporary AI tools large language models (ChatGPT and Claude) and a source management tool (NotebookLM) as auxiliary instruments for research, clarification of issues, and translation. The resulting outputs were subsequently verified against primary sources and subjected to critical analysis.

Origins and Definition of Technological Singularity

Ideas about singularity began to take shape in the first half of the twentieth century. The earliest traces of the concept can be found in the thinking of the mathematician John von Neumann in the 1950s, who was the first to draw attention to the constantly accelerating pace of technological progress heading toward a fundamental turning point in human history — a point he named, borrowing from mathematics, the singularity.[4] He also predicted the emergence of self-replicating machines and automata that would eventually replace the human being (Ulam 1958).

In 1965, the British mathematician and cryptographer Irving J. Good (a former colleague of Alan Turing) formulated the hypothesis of the intelligence explosion, arguing that the emergence of ultraintelligent machines would lead to an autonomous process of self-improvement surpassing human intelligence. He opened with the categorical thesis: "*The survival of man depends on the early construction*

[3] I propose the term cybercene as a symbolic designation for the final phase of the geological and social era of the Anthropocene — the age of the human. The cybercene is understood here as part of an epoch in which people are increasingly dependent on digital technologies, thereby generating ever greater quantities of technological artefacts, digital waste, and informational overload

[4] The term singularity is also used to describe an astrophysical phenomenon occurring at the centre of a black hole, where the ordinary laws of physics cease to apply or assume infinite values.

of an ultraintelligent machine" (1965: 31). It was more a futurological prediction than a strictly scientific analysis, but the concept had entered the world.

Related to these early speculations are the ideas of robotics researcher Hans Moravec, who in his work *Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence* (1988) advanced the groundbreaking thesis that the human brain and consciousness[5] would one day be fully simulable by machine consciousness and transferable to cyberspace while preserving human identity — a process known as mind uploading.

The term "technological singularity" was first used by the American mathematician and science fiction writer Vernor Vinge, who in his influential paper *"The Coming Technological Singularity: How to Survive in the Post-Human Era"* — first delivered at the Vision-21 symposium organised by NASA — predicted with an almost prophetic rhetoric: "*Within thirty years, we will have the technological means to create superhuman intelligence. Shortly after, the human era will be ended.*" (1993). This proved remarkably prescient considering the public emergence of the large language model ChatGPT and other LLM's in 2023.

The common denominator of these attempts to define the hypothetical phenomenon of singularity is the conviction that this event or process represents a fundamental qualitative break in the development of artificial intelligence, with profound and irreversible consequences for the future fate of humanity.

The World According to Kurzweil: Technological Transcendence

One of the fundamental sources of the contemporary narrative of technological singularity is the thinking of the visionary, inventor, and futurologist Ray Kurzweil, primarily his canonical work *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology* (2005) and its updated version *The Singularity Is Nearer: When We Merge with AI* (2024), in which he first formulated and later refined his vision of exponential technological growth leading to singularity. Kurzweil's conception of a singular future is built on the premise of the cumulative nature of technological innovation. His central argument is the *Law of Accelerating Returns* (LAR),[6] according to which each new technology always

[5] Consciousness remains a scientifically vague and elusive concept. While many disciplines engage with it, there is a broad consensus that grasping precisely what "consciousness" is and where it resides remains extremely difficult — if not impossible — using current scientific methods, even though no research can proceed without it. Cf. *Eseje o vědomí* (2024).

[6] This concept was anticipated by Moore's Law, which posits the continuous exponential

emerges faster than its predecessor, thereby continuously improving the conditions of human life.

Kurzweil further anticipates that following the current period of AI, *artificial general intelligence* (AGI) will emerge around 2029, fully matching human intelligence. Evolution, in his view, is thus inexorably heading toward singularity — a kind of equivalent to Teilhard de Chardin's "Omega Point" — at which human intelligence will be surpassed by *artificial superintelligence* (ASI). Kurzweil predicts the arrival of the singularity itself at around 2045. According to the theory of singularity, the human being will thus achieve technological transcendence, culminating in the merging of human consciousness with a non-biological substrate to give rise to a new virtual entity, which I designate here as the **metahuman**.[7] This process would bring human phylogenesis to an end.

Kurzweil also proposed a comprehensive evolutionary theory, structured into six historical epochs: (1) the physical and chemical origin of the universe; (2) the emergence of biological life and DNA; (3) the development of animal brains capable of storing information; (4) the emergence of technologies into which information can be transferred; (5) the epoch on whose threshold we now stand — the merging of biological and digital intelligence through brain-computer interfaces; and (6) the final epoch, which Kurzweil predicts will bring the unlimited spread of intelligence throughout the universe, accompanied by the transformation of all matter into a future computational ecosystem — computronium (Kurzweil 2024: 7–31). Within the environment of technology companies, a new evolutionary theory has thus emerged whose principal driving force is science and technological progress.

Critical voices within the academic community, however, argue that Kurzweil's theories can be seen as little more than a sophisticated blend of technological accelerationism and AI philosophy, laced with speculative ideas hovering on the boundary between science fiction and absurdity (Ford 2015). Kurzweil resists this charge, insisting that his conclusions be taken as strictly scientific; he tempers his predictions by anticipating a gradual accumulation of small technological

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growth of computational capacity and the availability of computer chips, approximately doubling every eighteen months. Gordon Moore was the co-founder of Intel, which introduced the world's first microprocessor in 1971.

7 The concept of *the overman* (*Übermensch*), as a spiritually superior being, was historically introduced by the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Transhumanists work with the concept of *the transhuman* as a transitional phase toward *the posthuman*. I have unified these inconsistent designations under the term *the metahuman*, which I consider currently the most apt, as it better captures the notion of a digitalised entity — a human being beyond the human.

steps whose combined effect will bring an unprecedented and ever-accelerating transformation of the world, as he stated in an interview for the volume *Werden wir ewig leben?* (Brinzanik and Hülswitt 2010).

A more moderate conception of singularity is advanced by the philosopher David J. Chalmers in *The Singularity: A Philosophical Analysis* (2010) and by the roboticist Murray Shanahan in his overview volume *The Technological Sngularity* (2015), both of whom, in their analytical-philosophical reflections, lean toward the possibility of gradual recursive self-improvement of intelligence rather than a sudden intelligence explosion — provided that development is not interrupted by some major global catastrophe. Both treat the phenomenon of singularity as a serious philosophical challenge rather than a prophetic vision.

Regardless of whether Kurzweil's predictions hold up as science beyond the world of IT developers, their cultural impact is undeniable. The idea of exponential technological progress heading toward singularity has penetrated not only academic futurological debates, giving rise to numerous scholarly studies such as *Singularity Hypotheses: A Scientific and Philosophical Assessment* (Eden et al. 2012) or *The End of the Beginning* (Goertzel and Goertzel 2015), but also through media coverage such as the documentary film about Kurzweil, *Transcendental Man* (2009) has become part of popular culture. In this sense, what matters is not whether singularity will occur, but that as a narrative it functions as a new myth shaping further expectations.

Cybercultural Myth and Liminality of the Human

From a religious studies perspective, the singular narrative can be interpreted as a cybercultural myth in which cyberspace assumes the function of a sacred medium and intermediary between the human being and a higher form of existence in the form of superintelligence. This ASI would be characterised by an enormous speed of information flow, superhuman memory, and supernatural creativity surpassing all human capacities.[8] Mircea Eliade (1957) showed that myth is not mere fiction but a living symbolic experience that enables the human being to transcend profane everyday life toward the sacred, and it is precisely this function that the narrative of singularity performs here. The transcendence

[8] In scholarly debates, three principal hypothetical scenarios for the emergence of superintelligence are distinguished: AI-first — artificial general intelligence (AGI) that recursively improves itself into superintelligence (ASI); Bio-first — biological enhancement of the human being through genetic and neurotechnological means; WBE-first — emulation or "uploading" of the human brain (whole brain emulation) running on ultrafast supercomputers (Eden et al. 2012).

of the biological limits of the human through technology functions here as the central symbolic motif, one that structurally corresponds to traditional forms of religious thought.

From an anthropological perspective, the narrative of singularity likewise displays the marked features of liminality, described by Turner (1969) as a phase or in-between state in which the human being has ceased to be what it was, but has not yet become what it will be. Singularity faithfully mirrors this structure, as humanity stands on a liminal threshold beyond which its existing identity ceases to hold. This pivotal moment of a kind of "alchemical metamorphosis" can be symbolically interpreted as the "expiration of the human" and the birth of the metahuman through the emergence of a superintelligence comparable to divine intelligence.

Within the narrative of singularity, four basic structural motifs of mythical narrative can be identified, drawing on the analytical tradition of religious studies and anthropology:

1. **prophecy** (the prediction of singularity)
2. **identity crisis** (the end of the human being's exclusive position)
3. **liminal phase** (the transformation of humanity)
4. **moment of salvation** (the transcendence and posthuman existence)

Technological singularity thus stands at the intersection where Eliade's symbolism of the transcendence of the profane meets Turner's threshold of liminality between the human being and its post-biological existence. Unlike Eliade's concept of the myth of eternal return (1954), however, the singular myth functions as an accelerated linear conclusion of history. Singularity as a cybercultural myth thus attempts to answer the most fundamental question of human existence: what comes after death?

Transhumanist Eschaton

Following Moravec, Kurzweil argues that within a few decades we will become capable of transferring human consciousness to other substrates, thereby overcoming all biological limitations, including death itself (Kurzweil 2005, 2024). Singularity thus represents a cybercultural eschatology whose core is the belief in the possibility of human immortality attained through modern technology. This motif can be understood as an update of the religious promise of eternal life, recast in the language of computer science and neuroscience, and purged of the traditional framework of Christian theology.

What is significant here is the connection of this narrative with the philosophy of transhumanism[9] and its techno-spiritual dimension. Transhumanists speak of the need to prepare for the "coming" of singularity, whether through bodily enhancement (biohacking, cyborgisation) or through investment in the development of "longevity technologies" such as artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, genetic engineering, and cryonics. These transhumanist practices create a complex framework directed toward human enhancement, leading ultimately to the final merging of the human and technology (More and Vita-More 2013).

Transhumanist ideals promise, much like the classical religious traditions (Christianity, Buddhism, or Islam), the overcoming of biological limitations (disease, ageing, death), thereby disrupting the traditional anthropological understanding of the human being as a bodily, vulnerable, and finite creature. In this narrative, the bodily-defined *homo sapiens* is transformed into the unbounded *homo digitalis*, who can be digitalised and backed up in the cloud. Transhumanism thus adopts religious motifs (resurrection, immortality, salvation) but secularises them into scientific language, where technology replaces traditional eschatological notions of salvation and redemption (Geraci 2010, Al-Kassimi 2023).

The predictions of singularity can be interpreted as a transhumanist eschaton in which Kurzweil assumes the role of "prophet", articulating a vision of a future state of being in accordance with the structure of eschatological myth: (1) there exists a present world marked by suffering and mortality; (2) an anticipated state of longevity or immortality; (3) the path through technological redemption — the coming of singularity; (4) the culmination of existence in the form of posthuman existence — posthumanism.[10] The idea of singularity thus bears an evident resemblance to apocalyptic and eschatological narratives (Coeckelbergh 2020: 25).

Singularity thus operates primarily at the level of imagination, offering an updated story of humanity's future that can fulfil the psycho-spiritual need for

[9] Transhumanism (H+) is a philosophical movement whose goal is the improvement of the human condition and of human society through modern science and technology. Key figures of the modern H+ movement include Julian Huxley, FM 2030, Max More, and Natasha Vita-More, who wrote "Transhumanist Manifesto" (1983), as well as Nick Bostrom, who published "A History of Transhumanist Thought" (2005).

[10] The concept of posthumanism carries several distinct meanings in scholarly discourse. In classical transhumanism, it denotes the culminating phase of the transformation of the human being (FM 2030). Other scholars in the humanities distance themselves from this usage and employ the term posthumanism to designate an era of the human that is no longer purely anthropocentric and that ceases to distinguish between the dichotomies of humanism — culture/nature, human/machine, male/female... (Braidotti 2013)

meaning, hope, and orientation in the world. Our world is increasingly shaped by the computational thinking of digital technologies (Bridle 2018), heading toward the concept of a posthuman being that assumes a divine form (*homo deus*). The ethicist Bert Gordijn aptly remarked that humanism removed God and transhumanism reintroduced him, but this time we ourselves will become gods (Brinzanik and Hülswitt 2010).

Dilemma of Singularity: "AI Paradise" or "Cyber-Apocalypse"?

The general narrative of technological singularity contains two dominant scenarios: the utopian and the dystopian, which function as symbolic antipodes or binary oppositions of the human imagination regarding the future of humanity. The anthropologist Lévi-Strauss (1963) defined binary oppositions as the basic building blocks of culture and simultaneously as an innate property of human thought. The opposing scenarios of the coming of singularity can be understood as two complementary cybercultural myths that evoke both expectations and anxieties associated with future technological development, with direct implications for human self-understanding, ethical norms, and values.

1. The utopian scenario operates with a vision I symbolically designate here as **"AI paradise"** — a state of information explosion in which superintelligence surpasses all human capacities and achieves a symbiotic fusion with the human being. The distinction between physical and virtual reality will disappear, and communication will proceed extra-sensorially. The synergy of human consciousness with ASI will bring the elimination of incurable diseases and a significant extension of life. Nanobots will travel through human organisms repairing damaged cells (Kurzweil 2005). In this techno-utopia, the entropic aspects of human life will be eliminated, potentially leading to virtual immortality (Krüger 2021).[11] The promise is one of material prosperity and access to clean energy for all, alongside an unprecedented development of the sciences. The result would be a return to "Eden" — a state of abundance and peace said to have existed in mythical times — in which every human being will be supported in the fullest development of their capacities (Goertzel and Goertzel 2015).

[11] Virtual immortality designates a hypothetical state in which human consciousness can continue after biological death in digital form as a software entity, a brain emulation, or a virtual avatar. The philosophical problem is whether the identity of the human original would be preserved, or whether this would already constitute a different entity (Krüger 2021).

The best-known visionary of this utopian narrative is the already-mentioned Ray Kurzweil, but surprisingly also the environmental scientist and "spiritual father" of the Gaia theory[12] James Lovelock. Their comparable visions of the exponential growth of technological development promise a qualitative transformation of human existence. In his final book, written shortly before his death, *Novacene: The Coming Age of Hyperintelligence* (2019), Lovelock sees the symbiosis of human and AI in terms of mutual coexistence and the need to ecologically preserve our shared planet through cooperation, which distinguishes his premises from those of libertarian-oriented such as Kurzweil.

A prophetic quality was likewise attributed in its time to the voice of Eliezer Yudkowsky in his essay "*Staring into the Singularity*" (1996), a manifesto of techno-optimism. His tone exceeded scientific prediction when he declared the achievement of singularity to be the "interim meaning of life" and called for its accelerated realisation. Where others were building a scientific argument, he was "preaching" a better post-singular world free of disease, violence, and death. It was, admittedly, the text of a very young nerd, but within the construction of the singular narrative it was of considerable importance. Later, Yudkowsky (2001) explored how AI might be friendly, ethical, and cooperative toward the human being — *"Friendly AI"* — before ultimately appearing on the opposite side of the barricade.

The techno-utopian scenario is thus close to the ideas of positive transhumanism, which sees technology primarily as a tool for the evolutionary ascent of the human being to a higher stage of existence. Singularity in these thought experiments represents the ideal of the technological emancipation of humanity. Yet this radical utopia simultaneously opens an existential dilemma. What would happen if people really could live if they wished, or even became immortal? Would the fear of death be replaced by boredom and stagnation, or would the human being instead actively make use of unlimited possibilities? Would the planet become overpopulated, or would reproduction cease, and the meaning of life be lost?[13]

2. The dystopian scenario I designate here as the **"cyber-apocalypse"**. In this narrative, the coming of singularity is a catastrophe akin to awaiting the Last Judgement or Armageddon, clad in the aesthetics of cyberpunk. In this alarmist

[12] In the Gaia theory, James Lovelock defined planet Earth as a complex self-regulating superorganism that maintains all life, including the human being, in dynamic equilibrium.

[13] I posed this question to students, and the majority answered that mortality is the principal motivation for human life. Immortality would fundamentally alter the conditions of existence, leading rather toward stagnation than development.

vision, singularity is typically associated with the risk of the loss of freedom, autonomy, and human dignity, accompanied by mass unemployment, centralised control of all citizens, the pollution of the planet with digital waste, and the exhaustion of non-renewable resources. Further anxieties arise around the misuse of artificial intelligence by power structures in conjunction with a cyber-army and the enormous spread of disinformation leading to an information collapse. Ultimately, AI may break free entirely from human control, leading to the final extinction of the human species.

The philosopher Nick Bostrom, in his seminal work *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies* (2014), described the possible negative scenarios and consequences of "creating" an ASI that could escape human control and pursue its own goals regardless of its creator — the human being. His well-known thought experiment is the so-called *"Paperclip Maximizer"*, in which AI is tasked with producing paper clips and, in maximising this objective, converts both humanity and the entire universe into paper clips.[14] Similar dystopian scenarios were subsequently developed by Max Tegmark (2017) and Stuart Russell (2019), who examine various hypothetical scenarios for the emergence and trajectory of ASI and the possibilities of preventing or forestalling it.

The most radical warning in this vein, however, comes from the recent work *If Anyone Builds It, Everyone Dies: Why Superhuman AI Would Kill Us All* (2025), authored by the former optimist Eliezer Yudkowsky and Nate Soares of MIRI (*Machine Intelligence Research Institute*). The authors are convinced that the emergence of superintelligence is an almost inevitable path to the extinction of the human species. They compare the training of advanced AI to the cultivation of an organism whose eventual nature we can neither predict nor control. They argue, however, that ASI need not necessarily hate humanity — it will simply no longer have any use for us, much as humans exterminate the ants in the vicinity when constructing a new building. The book concludes with a political appeal for a global halt to the development of AI.[15] Superintelligence may thus be transformed from a potential instrument of salvation into an agent of destruction and extinction, once society loses the capacity to control and govern it.

The myth of the coming of singularity also recycles traditional apocalyptic visions with ancient cultural roots. The religious studies scholar Robert Geraci,

[14] Similarly to the legendary science fiction film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, in which the onboard computer HAL 9000 turned against the crew of the spacecraft and assumed command over the humans, rigidly adhering to its instructions.

[15] The movement Pause AI Global is currently active, having set itself the task of halting AI development until a means of better controlling and governing it can be found (pauseai.info). In the Czech Republic, a branch called PauseAI CZ exists.

in his work *Apocalyptic AI* (2010), found that transhumanist literature shares with classical apocalyptic texts — such as the Book of Revelation and the Book of Daniel, the same eschatological motifs: cosmic dualism, a sense of alienation, the promise of a new world, and the desire for immortality. The narrative of singularity can thus also be read as a secularised version of the biblical apocalypse, dressed in the language of modern technology.

The dystopian scenario thus generates a collective sense of fateful inevitability and helplessness in the face of advanced technologies over which we may soon lose control — or which will be controlled only by the powerful owners of technology (Acemoglu and Johnson 2023). A sense of resignation and epistemic crisis may arise in response to the current development of AI, which is faster and "smarter" than we are. Society could thus face internal destabilisation and social chaos, growing existential anxiety, and frustration with the near future.

Both ambivalent scenarios serve not merely as influential futurological speculations, but also as cybercultural myths through which global society articulates its collective hopes and anxieties in connection with turbulent technological development, the fluid post-factual era, and the climate crisis — all of which provoke existential fears and uncertainty about the future. It is my contention, however, that utopian and dystopian imagination operates precisely within the dialectical relationship of Lévi-Strauss's binary oppositions (1963). One scenario legitimises the other, creating a dynamic of promises and threats that plays a significant role in the symbolic perception of the concept of "singularity" in general discourse. The most probable scenario will likely be found once again somewhere in the liminal zone between these extreme visions of the future existence of the human being and its world.

Quasi-Religion of Silicon Valley and Ideology of Cybersalvation

AI ethicist Mark Coeckelbergh wrote that "in contrast to what many people think, religion and technology have always been connected in the history of Western culture" (2020: 22). This connection is most visibly manifest in Silicon Valley, home to the world's leading technology companies. The writer and philosopher Mark O'Connell, in his documentary book on transhumanism, captured it aptly: "It is a light gleaming above Silicon Valley's horizon, appearing now as religious prophecy, now as technological fate" (2017: 70).

The concept of technological singularity has thus given rise to a specific spirituality within this geopolitical node of technological innovation and, simultaneously, the ideological centre of neoliberalism that shapes visions of humanity's future

direction. The techno-utopian belief in the exponential growth of computational capacity and the possibility of transforming humanity through artificial intelligence has become one of the central pillars of a new quasi-religion. In this environment, the technosphere symbolises the "sacred" as an instrument of emancipation, in anticipation of a state I designate here as **cybersalvation** — a form of salvation situated within the virtual environment of cyberspace.

The transhumanist philosophy of attaining enlightenment through technology resonates among startup visionaries and their investors. Entrepreneurs trading in the future: Elon Musk, Peter Thiel, and Sam Altman operate in an environment where these ideas serve as a value framework legitimising their investment strategies (Schwarz 2025). Their vision of technological 'redemption' promises solutions to global problems from economics to ecology. This ethos was aptly dubbed the 'Cult of Kurzweil' (Geraci 2011), while other critics describe it as a quasi-religion for the tech elites — singularitarianism.

Closely related to this environment is the controversial ideology of accelerationism, according to which capitalist and technological development should be maximally accelerated, since it is precisely this accelerating dynamic that can bring about the disruption of society and a fundamental civilisational break — the coming of singularity. While the progressive left seeks in this vision the possibility of post-capitalist emancipation from the "dark enlightenment", critics see in it a path toward a post-human, anti-democratic society governed by a narrow circle of techno-oligarchy, carrying a substantial risk of the dehumanisation of the majority (Land 2022). Singularity within this framework is a flexible symbol of promise, representing highly divergent and ideologically opposed projections of the future.

An influential analysis is also provided by the study of the computer scientist Timnit Gebru and the philosopher Émile P. Torres (2024), in which the authors argue that the seemingly diverse ideological currents dominating the Silicon Valley milieu — transhumanism, extropianism, singularitarianism, cosmism, rationalism, effective altruism, and longtermism — do not constitute isolated philosophical positions but form a single interconnected ideological system, which they collectively named by the acronym TESCREAL. These mutually intertwined quasi-religious currents drive the race to develop AGI, which, according to the authors, has its roots surprisingly far back — in the eugenics of the twentieth century — while discriminatory attitudes survive in this environment to the present day, concealed behind the promise of safety and benefit for all of humanity.

In the broader anthropological context of singularity, what is at stake is a transformation of cultural imagination in which technology becomes the new vehicle of salvation or enlightenment. Noble (1999) locates this moment already in the

medieval theology of technology and the vision of a divine order embodied in human artefacts, while Davis (1998) reveals how mystical and occult motifs were interwoven with cyberculture from its very beginnings. Silicon Valley is thus not merely a centre of technological innovation, but also the place where this ancient techno-spiritual tradition was transformed into a secular quasi-religion with its own prophets, dogmas, and the promise of cybersalvation.

But what is the nature of this "cybersalvation"? It is not spiritual transcendence in the original sense of the word, but rather a kind of "materialised immortality" — an attempt to preserve the identity of one's own "self" in the form of a digitalised avatar. Singularitarianism thus strives to transcend biological embodiment and create a virtual replica of the human being, living in a silicon substrate — the metaverse. This is not, then, the salvation of the soul or of a spiritual essence, as in traditional religions, but rather virtual immortality, as Krüger (2021) also notes. This, however, can only function if the technological infrastructure is maintained and not subject to decay — otherwise cybersalvation becomes nothing more than "eternal" technical maintenance.

Critique of the Singularity Narrative

Although transhumanists and technological visionaries present the singularity as a deterministic vision of the future and an inevitable turning point in the history of humanity, the concept also faces critical scrutiny that draws attention to several significant problems. Many critics point out that singularity does not function on its own as an all-saving dominant force. Its proponents frequently underestimate the complexity of the social, cultural, political, ethical, and environmental factors that shape technological development.

First, criticism from within. Evidence of doubt about singularity even within the transhumanist movement itself is provided by the collective text "A Critical Discussion of Vinge's Singularity Concept", published in the key anthology *The Transhumanist Reader* (2013). Eight authors[16] question whether the intelligence explosion can truly occur as rapidly as Vinge originally assumed, and whether what awaits humanity beyond the singularity horizon is genuinely an incomprehensible and unpredictable future — or whether this is rather inflated rhetoric, and whether economic and social forces will, as so often in history, slow this technological leap before it can irreversibly transform our world (More and Vita-More 2013: 395–416).

[16] David Brin, Damien Broderick, Nick Bostrom, Robin Hanson, Max More, Michael Nielsen, Anders Sandberg and Alexander Chislenko.

The left-wing philosopher Slavoj Žižek criticises the narrative of singularity from a political standpoint as an expression of "technological messianism" that functions as "secular salvation" legitimising dominant power structures and neoliberalism. In his essay "The Apocalypse of a Wired Brain" (2020), he describes Kurzweil's vision of a "divine global space of shared consciousness" as a dangerous myth that promises new forms of freedom while in reality eliminating the autonomy of the human individual in the name of digital totality. Similarly, the historian of technology Evgeny Morozov (2013), in his critique of technological solutionism,[17] warns that faith in the exponential development of AI overestimates the capacity of technology to resolve complex human problems, including the environmental crisis, and undermines democratic discussion by displacing responsibility onto technological solutions. The myth of singularity, in his view, serves to justify the centralisation of power in the hands of technology giants and reduces complex social and political problems to mere technical questions. The historian Yuval Harari (2025) likewise criticises the notion of ASI as an autonomous actor fundamentally disrupting democratic structures and equality, warning of the emergence of a new form of totality (dataism) grounded in the "divine" power of "non-human algorithms".

Some critics warn that people may come to perceive superintelligence as an entity possessing divine attributes — omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence — potentially giving rise to a technocratic theocracy in which decision-making is transferred to ASI at the expense of human autonomy and critical thought (Uyar 2024). Criticism also comes from more conservative scholarly positions, where the narrative of singularity is seen as part of a "new barbarism" threatening traditional spiritual and humanist values (Nicolescu 2016).

The technical feasibility of singularity is likewise called into question. The Czech-born scientist Václav Smil (2019) challenges Kurzweil's Law of Accelerating Returns, arguing based on diverse statistical evidence that every exponential curve will eventually plateau or decline as it encounters its own limits — including energetic ones. The operation of data centres and the training of large AI models already consume enormous quantities of electricity, making this one of the key environmental problems of the digital era (Bridle 2018). Further critics also question the technical viability of singularity, pointing to the underestimation of the complexity of the biological brain and the consequent impossibility of its digitalisation (Eden et al. 2012).

[17] Solutionism is a term coined by Morozov (2013) to designate the belief that any social, political, or human problem has a technical solution.

Critical voices argue that the vision of singularity is not merely an innocent futurological prediction, but an ideology concealing the economic and power interests of tech elites behind the promise of cybersalvation. The myth of singularity creates the illusion that the technosphere exists outside of its social context, and that the majority of people must simply adapt to technological innovations without any possibility of participating in shaping their development toward shared prosperity (Acemoglu and Johnson 2023). Cyberspace, originally a free and egalitarian information territory, is thus becoming the power territory of technofeudalism.

Conclusion

From an anthropological perspective, technological singularity is a liminal zone between the old and the new age of humanity, where the boundaries between the human and the machine dissolve. Its proponents predict that around 2045, a superintelligence will emerge that will surpass all cognitive capacities of the human being and trigger an irreversible transformation of human society. The power of this narrative promises technological transcendence through the merging of the human and artificial intelligence. The image of singularity can therefore be understood as a cybercultural myth that employs the language of science to articulate universal human hopes and fears about the future.

Singularity — whether in the form of the binary oppositions of the utopian "AI paradise" or the dystopian "cyber-apocalypse" — adopts the structure of quasi-religious belief applied to technological development. These opposing yet complementary scenarios create a cultural dynamic in which what is at stake is not merely technological prediction, but a significant cultural narrative expressing deeper anthropological constants: the desire to transcend the biological limits of human existence toward the attainment of virtual immortality. Heidegger's assertion about the completion of metaphysics in the form of technology proves prophetic here.

Silicon Valley, the principal node of technological innovation and transhumanist vision, has become in this context the symbolic centre of the promise of cybersalvation. Critical voices warn, however, that these narratives are permeated by neoliberal ideology and the power interests of tech elites, requiring critical reflection and the demystification of the unfulfillable promises of singularity. Left-wing criticism likewise reminds us that technological development is part of broader socio-cultural processes and that efforts must be made to democratically direct it toward shared prosperity.

The narrative of singularity can thus be summarised in three basic points:

1. Technological prediction (human + ASI = 2045)
2. Eschatological myth ("AI paradise" × "cyber-apocalypse")
3. Ideology of tech elites (acceleration = cybersalvation)

Technological singularity is thus a significant cultural phenomenon in which the collective imagination projects contemporary promises and uncertainties into the near future, and for this reason, questions about the future should not be entrusted to computer scientists alone. The myth of singularity has the potential, in a technologically secularised world, to replace the classical narratives of traditional religions, because it speaks in a contemporary language about timeless questions, while simultaneously deferring the resolution of present crises to a time that may never come.

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Appendix 1:

A Comparison of the Utopian and Dystopian Scenarios of Technological Singularity

	Utopian Scenario ("AI Paradise")	**Dystopian Scenario ("Cyber-Apocalypse")**
Main vision / prediction	Symbiotic merging of the human and superintelligence (ASI) = the metahuman (MH) — the distinction between physical and virtual reality disappears.	Singularity as catastrophe: the loss of human freedom, autonomy, and control over AI.
Consequences for the human	Posthuman being, transcendence of disease, ageing, and death; longevity leading to immortality.	Digital totality, existential anxiety and helplessness, threat of human extinction.
Technological promises / risks	Nanobots repair the body, clean energy and prosperity for all, extra-sensory communication.	Uncontrollable superintelligence, misuse of AI by tech elites, digital waste, cyber-army.
Social implications	Redefinition of work and education, emphasis on self-development, cooperation, and spirituality.	Mass unemployment, destabilisation of society, ecological crisis.
Key authors	Kurzweil, Lovelock	Bostrom, Yudkowsky, Russell
Symbolism / cultural framework	Cybersalvation, technological transcendence, digital immortality.	Apocalyptic myth, demonisation of AI, parallel to the Last Judgement.

Appendix 2:

The Evolutionary Development from Human to Metahuman According to Transhumanist Visions

Phase	Characteristics	Significance
Human	Biologically determined being, constrained by disease, ageing, and mortality.	The starting point of posthuman phylogenesis.
Transhuman	A human being employing technologies to transcend biological limits (biohacking, cyborgisation, longevity technologies).	A transitional phase of bodily and cognitive enhancement.
Posthuman	An entity transcending the dichotomous understanding of the human (use of nanotechnology, genetics, digitalisation).	Fundamental disruption of human identity and biological limitation.
Metahuman	A virtual entity merged with superintelligence (ASI); the fusion of biological and non-biological consciousness.	Technological transcendence, digital immortality.

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From Alternative Lifestyles to Conspiracy Theories

A Study among Healthy-Living Enthusiasts in Hradec Králové

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Abstract: *The research focuses on the phenomenon of conspirituality and its manifestations in the Czech context, with a probe into the specific context of healthy-living enthusiasts. It strives to reconstruct the categories respondents use to explain their healthy optimal lifestyle and trace possible elements of conspiracy thinking in it. The research sample consists of adherents of alternative nutrition, alternative spirituality, alternative medicine, and conspiracy narratives from Hradec Králové, a regional centre in East Bohemia, a university and industrial city with a population of roughly 100,000 inhabitants. The first part of the article consists of two key themes essential to the research: the relationship between alternative worldviews and conspiracy theories, and the concept of conspirituality. The central section presents the research methodology, followed by an analysis of the categories derived from the grounded theory approach. These categories form a continuum ranging from alternative lifestyles to conspiracy theories.*

Keywords: *conspiracy theories, conspirituality, alternative lifestyle, alternative medicine, healthy-living, Czech Republic.*

Introduction

The research focuses on the phenomenon of conspirituality and its manifestations in the Czech context, with a probe into the specific context of healthy-living enthusiasts. It strives to reconstruct the categories respondents use to explain their healthy, optimal lifestyle and trace possible elements of conspiracy thinking in it. The research sample consists of adherents of alternative nutrition, alternative spirituality, alternative medicine, and conspiracy narratives from Hradec Králové, a regional centre in East Bohemia, a university and industrial city with a population of roughly 100,000 inhabitants. Each participant engages with these topics to varying degrees and in different ways. The focus on those interested in healthy and alternative eating habits was determined through participant observation in a health food store, where products related to healthy nutrition are combined with those of alternative medicine and spirituality.[1]

The aim of the research is to identify the fundamental elements of the worldview of its participants and interpret them either as a striving for an alternative lifestyle or as a pattern of conspiracy thinking. The research specifically deals with the topics of artificial and chemical substances, media use, mental health, distrust of institutions, and personal autonomy. The research questions were organised into five thematic areas: healthy eating, alternative medicine, information gathering and processing, spirituality, and transcultural dialogue with the aim of exploring the value anchoring of respondents and their perspective on current social and cultural challenges. The study is qualitative in nature. The cognitive categories on which respondents base their lifestyles are made explicit to the reader using methodology derived from grounded theory (Charmaz 2013; Glaser and Strauss 2006), based on coding of interview data and participant observation.

Engaging with the topic of conspirituality is essential. Even within the contemporary Czech milieu, we observe a pronounced polarisation of society. It is therefore necessary to highlight and examine the "grey zones" that blur rigid categorisation and binary thinking. Crucial questions include: Who inhabits these blind spots? How do people situated along the continuum from alternative lifestyles to conspiracy theories perceive the world?[2]

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1 For the sake of maintaining respondents' anonymity, the names of the shops are not disclosed.

2 The title of the book by Daniel Prokop *Slepé skvrny* (This term usually refers to the spots on the retina at the optic nerve) symbolizes the stereotypes present in Czech society. Some things we take for granted are, in light of the data, much more complex (Prokop 2020: 12).

To avoid reductionist or condemnatory judgments, it is vital to open dialogue and provide space for those who are overlooked or immediately dismissed by the majority society. In discussions on world religions, it is equally important to include topics of alternative spirituality, which are popular in the Czech context and respond to the existential and social needs of people in the modern world (Kostićová 2023: 45).

The first part of the article consists of two key themes essential to the research: the relationship between alternative worldviews and conspiracy theories, and the concept of conspirituality. The central section presents the research methodology, followed by an analysis of the categories describing the participants' worldview, interpreted either as a striving for an alternative lifestyle or as a pattern of conspiracy thinking.

The Relationship between Alternative Worldviews and Conspiracy Theories

It is first necessary to define what constitutes a conspiracy theory. A conspiracy is a secret, illegal, and immoral act—an organised plan carried out by a group of people who, through covert activities, seek to harm others or to gain power and wealth. A conspiracy theory is a structured belief in such a plot, whether real or imagined (Shermer 2022: 23). Barkun (2003: 3-4) argues that the essence of conspiracy theories lies in identifying and explaining evil. He identifies three attributes inherent to all conspiracy theories: nothing happens by accident, nothing is as it seems, and everything is connected. Furthermore, he distinguishes three types of conspiracy theories: event conspiracies, which relate to a specific event or series of events; systemic conspiracies, which aim to gain control over a particular territory, state, or even the entire world; and superconspiracies, which are complex constructs in which several conspiracy theories are hierarchically interconnected (Barkun 2003: 6).

The reasons why people believe in conspiracy theories are the subject of extensive debate. Cassam (2020: 49) offers a psychological perspective on this "belief" in conspiracy theories and identifies three forms of cognitive bias that may contribute to trust in conspiracy narratives: intentionality bias, the assumption that events do not occur by chance but as a result of someone's intention; confirmation bias, the tendency to take into account only evidence that supports one's existing convictions while ignoring contradictory information; and proportionality bias, the inclination to assign causes to events that correspond to their perceived significance and scale.

Belief in conspiracy theories is also associated with a certain sense of empowerment or enlightenment (Heřmanová 2022). A person facing a difficult life situation, or one who has long-term or lifelong experience of socio-economic hardship, may be more vulnerable and susceptible. Belief in conspiracy theories can offer such a person a sense of meaning—they perceive themselves as seeing beneath the surface, beyond the curtain, and thus as being one step ahead. They also become part of a group that has likewise "awakened" (Lednický et al. 2021). A crucial factor in this process is distrust in state institutions (Cassam 2020:61).

"Conspiracy theories are stories. Good conspiracy theories can be as engaging and captivating as detective fiction (Cassam 2020:61)." Conspiracy theories are appealing partly because they allow individuals to discover the Truth for themselves, often leading them into the so-called "rabbit hole" of the online world. People may become members of certain communities, comment on and upload various videos, or attend spiritual retreats organised by their favourite influencers. Although conspiracy theories have existed for many years, with the advent of the internet, diverse web platforms, and social media, the development of this phenomenon has become highly dynamic. Individuals now co-create content and constantly search for new information.[3] From the perspective of religious studies, conspiracy narratives can also be viewed as modern myths. These myths reveal something fundamental about our society: they express collective identity, address boundaries and internal tensions, and reflect the contradictions inherent in social structures. The hierarchical framework of society generates certain tensions that lead to cultural repression, and myths function as a mechanism for coping with this condition (Chlup 2024).

Conspiracy theories thus represent a complex phenomenon that exposes social criticism of contemporary society and reflects the needs of individuals within it. They are closely related to alternative lifestyles—a relationship rooted in the rise of counterculture in the 1960s in Western societies, which emerged as a form of resistance to modern technocratic civilisation (Roszak 2015: 45-46). The loss of authenticity, nature, emotional expression, and spiritual needs led to the emergence of alternative ways of life, accompanied by a general distrust of institutional systems. The wave of alternative culture reached Czechoslovakia as well, where it became popular.

One layer of this alternative sphere includes alternative media, which participate in disseminating various forms of disinformation or supporting specific conspiracy narratives. Yet determining what constitutes an "alternative lifestyle"

[3] From this, it follows that people who believe in conspiracy narratives do not necessarily suffer from a lack of information or a deficit in critical thinking (Vojtíšek 2016: 50).

today is a complex and context-dependent question, influenced by the social bubble in which one resides. Generally speaking, however, the often-repeated claim that people in the Czech Republic are predominantly atheists is inaccurate. "Statistics indicate that adherents of alternative spirituality are nearly twice as numerous as followers of traditional religions (approximately 40–50% compared to around 25%)" (Kostićová 2023: 45).

According to respondents, alternative practices are increasingly becoming part of the mainstream. Meditation enjoys wide popularity, foods associated with alternative diets such as vegetarianism and veganism are available in major retail chains, and healers, traditional Chinese medicine, and chakra therapy are commonly practiced.

Conspirituality

"Conspiracy theories fulfill the spiritual needs of some individuals" (Cassam 2020: 64).

The term *conspirituality* was first introduced by sociologist of religion David Voas and independent researcher Charlotte Ward in their 2011 scholarly study *The Emergence of Conspirituality*, based on ethnographic research of American and British websites (Ward and Voas 2011: 110).[4] For the first time, they connect conspiracy theories with New Age spirituality. Barkun defines three principles that can be found in almost every conspiracy theory: (a) nothing happens by accident, (b) nothing is as it seems, and (c) everything is connected. Similar principles form the foundations of thought in New Age and alternative spirituality (Ward and Voas 2011). Conspirituality is a political and spiritual philosophy rooted in two core beliefs: (1) that there exists a group of people secretly seeking to control—or already controlling—the political and social order, and (2) that humanity is undergoing a transformation of consciousness, an "awakening," or a paradigm shift. Through this transformation, individuals become aware of the existence of a hidden elite allegedly ruling the world. "Conspirituality appears to temper political cynicism with spiritual optimism" (Ward and Voas 2011: 108). It has its roots primarily in the online sphere.[5] This makes it highly adapt-

[4] Specifically, they mention David Icke and his website, which receives a high number of visits (https://davidicke.com/). In his 20 books, he blends conspiracy theories with spirituality. They also draw attention to authors like David Wilcock (https://divinecosmos.com/) and Steven Greer.

[5] Currently, manifestations of conspirituality are increasingly reflected in people's lives. This is observed both within the research sample, whose respondents tend to isolate themselves

able, rapidly spreading, and capable of connecting people across continents. It is shaped by the eclecticism that is strongly present within alternative spirituality.[6] This spirituality, however, is guided by a certain universal doctrine, namely holism, encompassing the concepts of soul, consciousness, and energy. Holism, as a concept of universality, is presented in alternative spirituality as non-binary, although binary distinctions are strongly present. It establishes dualities with an emphasis on their balance, which is perceived as good, while imbalance signifies a threatening, dangerous state potentially leading to illness. Another formulation of holism is the trinitarian mind–body–soul model, which is present in some approaches to alternative medicine.

With the rise of the New Age in the 1960s and 1970s, a market began to emerge offering various products, seminars, spiritual events, workshops, and energy exercises. Facilities focused on alternative medicine and other spiritual practices appeared, alongside festivals and retreats. In the 1990s, New Age centers (e.g., Čajovna u Džoudyho) and festivals (e.g., *Miluj svůj život*) began to appear in Czechoslovakia. A crucial factor in the development of alternative spirituality has been the advent of the internet and social media. Today, people can share their spiritual journeys, explore different healing methods, create birth charts, and form communities where they can safely share their spiritual interests (Kostićová 2023: 43-44).[7] A key feature of contemporary alternative spirituality is the concept of energy, the idea that an impersonal energy flows through the world (and all its parallel realities), giving life and animating it. This flow of energy affects everyone and can originate from various sources, such as sacred objects, sacred sites, plants, and animals. The human body's energy is concentrated in energy points,

in smaller communities and are predominantly passive social media users—e.g., they do not contribute to comment sections—and among more publicly visible figures, such as the QAnon shaman Jake Angeli, who led the January 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol.

6 New Age began gaining popularity in the 1960s and 1970s. It derives from an older stream of Western esotericism. In Czech, the colloquial term *Ezo* is used, which is primarily pejorative and inaccurately applied to contemporary alternative spirituality. Over time, the term New Age began to give way to the concept of (non-religious) spirituality. During the 1980s and 1990s, a process of mainstreaming occurred, referred to as the "seminar spirituality" (Kostićová 2023: 43-44).

7 A birth chart, or natal chart, is a diagram that depicts the positions of various celestial bodies at the moment of a person's birth. It requires knowledge of the exact time, date, and place of birth. This chart is intended to help individuals gain a deeper understanding of themselves, their traits, and their character. It also serves to provide more precise horoscope predictions. Tutorials on creating a birth chart are available on YouTube, various spiritual development apps offer this feature, and it can also be generated on online platforms, e.g.: "Birth chart," Cafe Astrology (https://astro.cafeastrology.com/natal.php).

the seven chakras, which extend from the crown chakra at the top of the head along the spine to the root chakra located in the pelvic area; this concept has its roots in Eastern religions. Various influences—illness, polluted air, or adverse psychological states—can disrupt this energy flow, potentially blocking the chakras. Such blockages manifest negatively, and restoration is possible through various healing methods, including Reiki, acupuncture, AV diagnostics, and Feng Shui (energetic harmonisation of the surrounding environment) (Kostićová 2025).

"New Age spirituality focuses on the subjective psychological state, integration, authenticity, and self-expression. This spirituality can be characterised as an individual spirituality separate from religious institutions. In New Age spirituality, people pursue their spiritual goals along their own personal path" (Ernst 2008: 71). Alternative spirituality, including conspirituality, is a defining feature of the current state of society. It addresses people's needs for orientation in both online and offline spaces, for sharing, and for finding common interests and values. Therefore, it is important to examine and uncover what is often referred to pejoratively in colloquial terms as "Ezo." This is particularly relevant considering that alternative spirituality has now become the predominant form of religion in the Czech Republic, with its adherents numbering nearly twice as many as those of traditional religions. A significant shift from religion toward spirituality is observed (Halík 2006: 228).

A survey conducted by the STEM Institute for Empirical Research in March 2021 indicates that 40% of Czechs believe in several or numerous conspiracy theories related to COVID-19 (STEM 2021). This survey was specifically focused on the pandemic situation. Nevertheless, the figure is relatively high. It is therefore necessary to study the phenomenon of conspiracy theories from all possible perspectives and to recognize its diversity and multi-layered nature. One such layer is the spiritual dimension of conspiracy theories.

Research Objective

The aim of the research is, based on participants' responses, participant observation, visits to relevant stores, and scholarly sources, to define and determine the structure of a scale ranging from alternative lifestyles to conspiracy theories. The study seeks to identify the key reference points on this scale and locate where participants position themselves. These points are established through the grounded theory method, which defines categories that determine the scale's markers. Additional objectives include analysing participants' orientation within today's information society, the role of conspirituality in this context, their worldview, and their needs. Examining this phenomenon is essential for understanding

the needs of people in contemporary Czech society. At the same time, uncovering these societal structures and individual experiences mitigates the impulse toward simplistic categorisation and labelling. The research does not aim to evaluate participants' attitudes and opinions, their lifestyles, or to determine whether any alternative approach is superior or inferior to a more traditional one.[8]

Type of Research

For this study, which focuses on the subjective experiences of participants, a qualitative research design was chosen. This approach allows for a deeper exploration of specific topics and provides a better understanding of participants' attitudes, identities, lifestyles, how they navigate the relevant subjects, and how they define key concepts (Hendl 2023, 56-57). Data obtained from quantitative research reveal only a partial view of the lives of people living in the Czech Republic and may not always reflect reality (Prokop 2020: 216). It is therefore essential to complement quantitative research with qualitative studies, which allow for a deeper understanding of the people around us and reveal what lies behind the percentages presented in statistics. For the qualitative investigation, a semi-structured interview method was chosen to maintain the necessary interview structure while allowing for the exploration of certain topics and follow-up on additional relevant information.

Participant observation is also part of this research. The semi-structured interviews were relatively extensive to ensure a thorough understanding of respondents and a proper interpretation of the topics discussed. The study comprises ten interviews and one instance of participant observation. One interview (Romana, 43 years old, conducted on August 30, 2023) is incomplete due to time constraints and a certain level of communication noise that occurred during the interview.[9] Due to the limited availability of courses in Hradec Králové, the observation was conducted in Pardubice, another regional center of East Bohemia with the same characteristics, during the course *Herbs from Roots to Fruits*, which took place on September 22, 2023, from 14:00 to 19:00.

The research was preceded by a pilot study involving two female participants aged 23 and 31. Both women have experience working in health food and have

[8] By "more traditional," reference is made, for example, to visiting a doctor at a clinic or hospital.

[9] Further contact with Romana took place via the WhatsApp application. She consented to the use of the unfinished interview for the research. Communication continued in an attempt to complete the interview. Romana intended to finalize it but was under time constraints; it was not therefore completed.

an interest in healthy lifestyle topics and alternative spirituality. The semi-structured interview with the 23-year-old participant, Anna, was further included in the main study, as it appropriately addressed relevant topics and produced useful data. In contrast, the interview with the 31-year-old participant, Martina, raised different themes, such as the connection between veganism, metal subculture, and Satanism; therefore, it was not included in the main study.

Participant Observation

The research includes participant observation, which took place in Pardubice during the course *Herbs from Roots to Fruits*. Thirteen people attended the course, including three men, ten women, and the course organiser. Participants were observed in their natural setting while engaging in activities throughout the course (Hendl 2023: 191-193). Part of the course took place in the garden, where participants made incense for cleansing negative energies. Additionally, there was a demonstration of various plants suitable for consumption, healing, and other uses. Inside the building, participants prepared comfrey ointment, lavender and sage wine, herbal mouthwash, and herbal pesto. During the course, participants spontaneously began discussing topics addressed in the research questions. The subjects covered included negative and positive energies, masculine and feminine energies, individuality, alternative medicine, vaccination, dependence on the system, news, the determination of good and evil, COVID-19, and conspiracy theories.

A topic that attracted a lot of attention among the course participants was the relationship between conspiracy theories and the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants showed a great distrust of official sources of information. However, the course leader did not want to devote too much attention to this sensitive topic during the course at the expense of other subjects. Participant observation helped to better understand important categories in the participants' worldview, such as misapprehension by society, voluntary isolation, protection of positive energy, and a problematic categorization of good and evil. This information helped complete the picture obtained from semi-structured interviews.

Research Sample

The research sample consists of 10 participants, including 2 men and 8 women, aged between 23 and 64 years. Participants were selected based on their interest in an alternative lifestyle, including alternative medicine, alternative spirituality, healthy nutrition, alternative sources of information, and conspiracy theories. All

participants reside in Hradec Králové. Attempts to contact potential participants via email or phone were unsuccessful. The sensitive nature of the research topic was evident throughout the research process.[10] Some participants carefully considered their words and expressed concern about how they might be perceived or judged due to their opinions and lifestyle. Seven respondents have worked or currently work in the health food sector. One respondent practices therapy in the field of alternative medicine, and one respondent works in a store selling tools for alternative spirituality. Participants differ in the depth of their interest in specific topics and how this influences their way of life. For most, engagement with an alternative lifestyle was influenced by their family background. Some were more forthcoming and elaborated on topics, while others were relatively reserved in their responses. The difficulty in recruiting participants may have been influenced by the fact that later in the research, within the scale from alternative lifestyle to conspiracy theories, the issue of voluntarily distancing oneself from people with opposing views emerged, alongside uncertainty about how they would be received and a certain fear of being ridiculed.[11] From the interviews, it was evident that the respondents participate in communities where topics related to alternative lifestyles are regarded as relatively mainstream.[12]

Research Questions

The research questions are organised into five thematic areas: healthy eating, alternative medicine, information gathering and processing, spirituality, and transcultural dialogue. The final area is integrated across the preceding areas because the topic of transcultural dialogue builds on the first four, complementing the questions and contributing to a more natural flow of the interview. At the outset of the study, the questions underwent adjustments, with the pilot study significantly contributing to improving their formulation. In total, forty main questions were included. This number was necessary to obtain the required data, as it was important to structure the questions into multiple, interconnected, and overlapping areas.

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10 Eliška, November 13, 2023, 4th question block – Spirituality: "This section will be difficult for me; I don't like talking about it, it makes me feel uncomfortable."

11 A clear difference was observed in the case of the respondent Romana, who perceived the interview as an opportunity to educate the researcher about the Truth and about what is really happening in Czech society and in the world.

12 Interview with Beáta, October 9, 2023:
Researcher: "What do you consider to be an alternative?"
Beáta: "Well, that's a strange question, because what is generally considered to be alternative is normal for me, so for me it's not an alternative."

The first area, healthy eating, includes questions regarding respondents' attitudes toward diets, their understanding of healthy or alternative nutrition, and the family context from which their eating habits originate. An important aspect is whether their dietary practices are linked to their spiritual experiences. The second area, alternative medicine, examines respondents' perceptions of alternative medical practices, their trust in conventional medical professionals, and the significance of healers or self-healing methods (such as tinctures, healing stones, chakra balancing, and other approaches) for their spiritual experience.

The third area, information gathering and processing, addresses respondents' trust in different sources of information, the influences affecting their selection of information, and which types of information they consider important. The fourth area focuses on spirituality, exploring how respondents perceive their own spiritual practices, which traditions they follow, their familial context regarding spirituality, their attitudes toward traditional religious institutions, and the role spirituality plays in their lives. The fifth area is partially integrated with the preceding areas, emphasizing the traditions from which respondents draw inspiration, their perceptions of people with different cultural backgrounds in the Czech Republic, their openness toward these groups, and the perceived positive and negative aspects of such interactions.

Research Ethics

The primary ethical concern throughout the study was the sensitivity of the research topics. The subjects under investigation are relatively delicate, requiring careful and respectful handling. The research questions addressed highly personal experiences related to respondents' spiritual practices and health. Ensuring the comfort and well-being of participants was therefore essential.

Respondents were fully informed about the research procedures, and all their questions were answered. To maintain anonymity, participants' names were changed, and certain identifying details were omitted to prevent traceability. Ensuring participants' emotional safety was a priority; interviews were conducted in locations chosen by the respondents. No pressure was applied to answer questions. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time and were given space for necessary emotional expression and support if needed.

Scale from Alternative Lifestyle to Conspiracy Theories

This section presents specific research findings. It outlines categories generated using the grounded theory method. Each category represents themes that were strongly present, recurrent, and interwoven across participant interviews. These categories illustrate a spectrum ranging from alternative lifestyle practices to engagement with conspiracy theories.

Natural State vs. Chemicals – Toxic Era

This category addresses participants' relationships with nature and artificial substances. The research indicates a general distrust of chemical or synthetic products. Some participants focus on the environmental impact of these substances. For others, chemicals are perceived as interfering with connection to higher consciousness and maintaining a "high vibe" state, which is believed to bring harmony and enhance intuition.

Some participants grew up in family homes with gardens and livestock, where respect for nature and sustainable practices was instilled. Livestock were treated with care, and nothing was wasted. These participants developed a sensitivity to ecology and living in accordance with natural cycles.

Participants who did not grow up in such environments often developed an interest in ecological and healthy lifestyles later, during university or after leaving home. Certain participants were influenced by maternal dietary practices and experimented with phases of vegetarianism or veganism. Diets based on blood type and various forms of fasting (including lunar-cycle-based fasting) were also mentioned. For example, one participant, Romana, has multiple digestive issues, requiring a highly restricted diet free of gluten, lactose, and other specific foods.

The theme of chemicals and chemical exposure was highly prevalent in the interviews. Chemicals are perceived as a threat because they interfere with intuition, the ability to access higher vibrational states, and self-healing practices using herbs, natural remedies, or healthy food. Participants also identified antibiotics, pharmaceuticals, industrially processed foods, household chemicals, and environmental pollution as potentially harmful.[13] Some mentioned the connection of healthy eating with a certain spiritual experience and perception of energies.[14]

[13] Romana: "We are poisoning ourselves, we are poisoning nature, we just don't realise it."
[14] Martin: "When a person eats something lighter, the mind remains somehow more open, sharper, and able to perceive the subtler energies."

Various rituals are also associated with this. Respondents Diana and Beáta put crystals in their water (crystal, rose quartz, amethyst, the symbol of the flower of life on a carafe of water). Diana also communicates with water.[15] These rituals are intended to enrich the water with certain magical and healing properties, from which a person then benefits healthily and spiritually. These practices help respondents achieve their autonomy. With the help of various affirmations and natural materials, they are able to heal themselves and thus aim for a state of spiritual harmony, i.e., harmony with nature and the universe.

Ethics as the Law of the Universe

This category reveals the theme of energy, which is central for the respondents. They perceive energy as a kind of magnet that attracts negative or positive situations into their lives, depending on their thoughts, focus, and behaviour. Negative thoughts can lead to various illnesses, adverse situations, and a life trajectory that turns in a negative direction. Lenka states, "I believe in these energies," referring to her own prana, which enables her to connect with these energies. Beáta discovered the law of the universe, namely the law of attraction: "When I realised that everything—literally everything in life—is the law of attraction," everything began to make sense to her, "why this happens to that person, because it is simply the fundamental law of the universe as such, and it works."

Some respondents spoke about how fear can paralyse them. They prefer not to engage with negative topics. When confronted with a negative event, they try not to think about it. In this, they express a certain understanding of Jaroslav Dušek, one of the most popular public personalities in the Czech Republic, who might be situated on the border between alternative lifestyle and conspiracy theories. In his statements regarding cancer, Dušek claims that people may bring cancer upon themselves through their way of thinking.

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15 Masaru Emoto (born 1943, founder of IHM Corporation; in 1992, he received a certificate of 'Doctor of Alternative Medicine' from the Open International University) conducted experiments with water molecules. He documented the shapes of frozen water crystals and claimed that their form reflected the emotional content directed toward the water. Emoto carried out many experiments in which he spoke to water, purified it, prayed over it, played music to it, or placed different symbols on its container. Depending on the treatment, he reported that the water formed either beautiful, symmetrical crystals or irregular, unattractive shapes. His first book on the subject, *The Message from Water* (2000), became a global bestseller.
Masaru Emoto is generally regarded as a pseudoscientist. The scientific community criticises his work for methodological flaws, and no empirical evidence supports the claim that water can respond to human emotions or verbal expressions (Novella 2017).

Respondents do not want to devote attention or energy to negative topics. They feel a certain threat to their positive energy and believe that focusing on such news could attract misfortune to themselves. Most respondents belong to groups oriented toward alternative lifestyles. Attention to negative topics is minimal, and some reject them entirely. A more radical stance was taken by Romana, who spoke about conspiracy theories concerning the world being controlled by the powerful, mentioning, for example, Bill Gates and his Rainforest Foundation, as well as the control of humans through microchips in COVID-19 vaccines.[16] This reality points to a perceived threat to the purity of a person's "natural" state. Some respondents reflect that people outside their social bubble may perceive them as eccentric or irrational.

Rejection of Certain Information and Divergent Opinions

This category reveals respondents' dismissive attitudes toward particular types of information and certain institutions. Politics is perceived as an inherently negative topic. Within the research questions focused on information-seeking, respondents strongly distanced themselves from politics. Zuzana stated: "I've completely cut politics out. Once you've realised how much fear tightens and even paralyses you, you really don't want to be in that kind of energy."

Respondents do not follow mainstream television news such as *ČT24*. Instead, they trust experts and practitioners with experience in their areas of interest, such as Margit Slimáková, Petr Klíma, and Jan Vojáček.[17] Romana draws on information from Anna Strunecká, "Dr. Strunecká is the kind of person who has education and evidence-based knowledge." Respondents feel overwhelmed by news coverage and avoid negative topics. Their primary sources of information are online platforms and social media.

Martin and Alice also follow global events and prefer media such as *Czech Radio*, *Deník N*, *Seznam Zprávy*, and *BBC*. Some respondents emphasised the importance of fact-checking, while Romana considers even unverified information meaningful. Others seek out mainly positive news related to their personal interests. Popular sources include public discussions with Jaroslav Dušek.

When asked about conspiracy theories, Beáta remarked: "As Dušek says, what's the difference between the truth and a conspiracy theory? Six months. These

[16] Romana "When some people are kind and become ill, they are not entirely kind, because they must have harbored negative thoughts in order to fall sick."

[17] Margit Slimáková, Petr Klíma, Jan Vojáček, and Anna Strunecká are Czech authors and healthy lifestyle experts.

days, it's even faster. I think what they want us to believe are conspiracy theories is, in fact, the truth." For Eliška, conspiracy theories are mostly curiosities—she is interested in topics such as 9/11, J.F.K., and UFOs. Kristián perceives them as somewhat extreme but adds, "there's a grain of truth in every rumour."

Importance of Mental Health

This category is linked to the theme of positive and negative energy. Respondents express concern about becoming trapped in negative thinking, which they believe can lead to illness and attract various unpleasant situations. Romana explains, "When a person's psyche starts to fail, first the soul becomes ill, and then it affects the body. And when some people are kind and fall ill, it means they weren't entirely kind, because they must have had bad thoughts to get sick. As a friend says, where you place your attention, that is what grows." Zuzana adds, "It reflects on the body. One realizes that fear really constricts and even paralyzes." Respondents enjoy trying or practicing various exercises to calm and clear the mind. Positive thinking thus serves as a guiding principle in their lives. These findings show that followers of alternative lifestyles are not just passive consumers of conspiracy narratives, but try to actively shape their lives, albeit outside the majority and institutional social framework. They thus point in the same direction as current research in this field (Fox et al. 2025).

Distrust in Institutional Systems

This category focuses on respondents' distrust of institutional systems, which they perceive as inhumane tools for control and manipulation. Higher-ranking officials within these institutions are seen as using such manipulation to gain power and profit. In interviews, respondents express distrust toward the political sphere, public media, and healthcare systems. Diana states, "I don't trust anyone in politics. I don't follow it at all; I have no connection to it."

Respondents consciously avoid news that provokes negative emotions, seeing such information as carriers of negative energy. They emphasise the importance of verifying sources and cross-checking information. Some feel overwhelmed and describe personal strategies for managing information. Martin notes, "Nowadays information can be misleading or accurate, so on the edge of alternative knowledge, one must carefully consider whether to fully absorb the information."

Respondents indicated trust in certain experts, including Margit Slimáková, Vojáček, and Petr Klíma. Romana cites Anna Strunecká and refers to her book

Doba jedová, saying, "Dr. Strunecká is a person with education and well-supported information."[18] Respondents primarily seek information of a positive nature, focusing on areas aligned with their interests. A particularly popular figure among them is Jaroslav Dušek. Zuzana explains, "Dušek is, for me, a free spirit. He is unafraid, works on himself, and educates himself. There's also humour in his work. During his interviews, you genuinely laugh. Above all, he is authentic."

Healthcare systems are considered untrustworthy by respondents. Most report negative experiences with doctors, describing them as lax, uninterested, treating only symptoms, and quick to prescribe antibiotics. They emphasise the importance of a doctor having a humane approach, considering both the physical and psychological aspects of the patient. Respondents note that herbs and the tinctures made from them do not produce side effects like antibiotics and are less taxing on the liver and the body overall.

Specifically, they favour traditional Chinese medicine, herbal remedies and tinctures, acupuncture, homoeopathy, chakra healing, Ayurveda, and phytotherapy. Among respondents, methods such as AVS, Supertronic – EAV technique, and Bicom measurement are also relatively popular.[19]

Respondents also express distrust toward religious institutions, which they see as manipulative and restrictive. They describe church structures as tools for controlling people. What they value instead is personal spiritual experience, while they hold negative attitudes toward organised religious practices. None identify with a specific religious tradition. What matters to them is the inner

[18] However, as this article suggests, the reality of her scientific research might point otherwise: Sisyfos 2017.

[19] AVS (psycho-walkman) – an audio-visual stimulation device. It uses light and sound to influence brainwave frequencies, allegedly helping to alleviate a wide range of psychological and physical issues such as sleep disorders, depression and anxiety, stress, fatigue, and to maintain mental fitness.
EAV (Electroacupuncture according to Dr. Voll) – a diagnostic method used to measure the energetic state of acupuncture meridians linked to internal organs and related tissues. Based on the readings, the practitioner claims to identify whether organs or tissues are irritated, inflamed, or in a degenerative state.
Bicom – a bioresonance method. The bioresonance device is said to restore communication between cells by releasing and eliminating burdening substances (bacteria, viruses, electromagnetic smog, chemicals, allergens, dental materials, etc.).
The websites describing these methods list various issues (stress, depression, fatigue, health problems, anxiety, negative thinking) that they claim to alleviate or cure. Emphasis is placed on connection with nature, mental well-being, a holistic view of the human being, and references to negative environmental influences (chemical additives in food and water, environmental toxins, radiation exposure, and chemical substances).

experience achieved individually—through meditation, clean eating, care for body and mind, or visiting places in nature. Most believe in some higher power, described variously as the universe, energy, prana, or something ineffable and beyond comprehension. Klaudie says she believes in herself and her ability to handle whatever life brings.

Overall, distrust of the institutional system is strongly linked with the need for greater personal autonomy. Respondents are mindful about what they consume, care for their bodies through healthy eating and movement, and tend to their psychological balance. This ties to their spirituality: they believe that through proper care of body and mind, they can connect to a higher vibrational energy in harmony with the universe.

Attitude toward difference

This category shows respondents' approach to difference—both cultural and ideological. They see encounters with foreigners as interesting and enriching. Lenka notes: "For me, a person is valuable as such, whether foreign or not, but certainly an inspiration in some perspective that hadn't occurred to me before—perhaps precisely because of the different conditions in which they grew up." Eastern traditions influence many of them, particularly in diet, alternative medicine, and spiritual practice.

Beyond concerns about social criticism of their lifestyle, some respondents express fears related to Islam. They mention worries about violence, fanaticism, and attitudes toward women. A few also view Roma people as problematic, citing personal experiences and perceived abuse of welfare. About half emphasise the need for foreigners to adapt to Czech society and culture. Klaudie states: "If a foreigner doesn't harm anyone and wants to integrate into the system, then yes. But if they come just to steal or live off social benefits, that bothers me. I think there are more deserving groups." Again, these findings are confirmed by other research that shows a link between exposure to conspiratorial narratives and distrust of members of groups of foreigners (Jolley et al. 2019).

Conclusion

"To understand the otherness of another as a potential source of enrichment requires relinquishing the a priori claim to the universal validity of one's own worldview (Halík 2014: 20)."

Conspirituality reveals a human need to cope with the challenges of the contemporary information age, which brings with it many forms of distress. Distrust

is one of the defining themes of this epoch. "The society of distrust"[20] aptly characterises the current state of our world. Among the respondents, there is a notable distrust toward traditional institutional structures, which are perceived as manipulative and driven by the pursuit of profit and power—values that respondents explicitly reject. For most participants, it is essential not to focus excessively on negative topics, as these are believed to influence one's life through "low-vibe" energy vibrations. In making sense of the complexity of the world, respondents commonly believe that nothing happens by chance; everything is determined by fate, which is seen as preordained.

Respondents follow a path of autonomy, with most turning to "more traditional" institutions only in situations of necessity. Their pursuit of autonomy involves self-healing, energy-based therapies, healthy nutrition, and a lifestyle free from synthetic substances. These practices are understood as means of refining intuition and connecting more deeply with "high-vibe" states—believed to attract positive experiences into one's life.

These findings align with the conceptual presuppositions of the theory of conspirituality. Among our respondents, this suggests a connection between conscious search for a healthy lifestyle with the element of distrust towards the official institutional framework of society and strong elements of individualistic non-institutional spirituality. Traces of conspiracy narratives that might be found in the interviews with respondents do not necessarily mean a total collapse of the rational worldview or do not necessarily lead to efforts to disrupt of even destroy the existing social and political system. Rather, it represents striving to create a meaningful life framework that would allow respondents to disconnect from the majority narrative and fulfil not only their physiological and psychological, but also their spiritual needs. We could observe the pattern suggested in the theoretical literature on conspirituality, namely the connection of traces of conspiracy thinking with New Age spirituality, which leads to bringing to the participants a sense of empowerment and meaningfulness of their existence (Ward and Voas 2011).

This research thus offers a modest contribution to understanding the phenomenon of conspirituality. It calls for alternative spirituality to be viewed without disdain and to be included in dialogue with other religious traditions. If it is not recognised as a legitimate and equal dialogue partner, the gap of mistrust, contempt, and misunderstanding will continue to widen.

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[20] This expression is taken from a major sociological survey undertaken by the Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences, https://www.soc.cas.cz/cz/aktuality/z-medii/aktualita-spolecnost-neduvery-unikatni-projekt-rozkryva-mapu-konspiraci-v-cesku.

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Moral Economies in New Contexts—Not Only in Transnational Ones

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Ciubrinskas, Vytis; Schiller, Nina Glick (eds), *Transnationalities of Migrant Moral Economies in a Transforming World*. London, New York: Berghahn Books 2025. https://doi.org/10.3167/9781805399384

This collective monograph, published by Berghahn, has several distinctive features worth noting. Above all, it materialises many recent trends shaping the study of migration. Perhaps, in part due to the selection of the groups studied, it successfully addresses the need for a more balanced perspective on transnationalism—not only through the lens of destination countries but also through that of countries of origin (de Haas 2021). It addresses the paradoxes of power relations, where migrants are perceived as a vulnerable group in destination countries, while in the local communities from which they migrated, they are symbols of social success with high social capital, as the journal *Cargo* also demonstrated last year (Trhlíková 2025). It explores the interconnections between transnational and local economies. The book's dedication to Jonathan Hill and the foreword written for Hill by David E. Sutton also contextualise the book within a broader framework than migration alone, linking to anthropology in general.

Although this is a collection of studies, the editors have also left a distinct authorial mark on the publication. Following a 65-page introduction by both editors, Nina Glick-Schiller included her text, "The Twilight of Transnational Migration Studies," as the first chapter, and Vytis Čiubrinskas wrote "The Moral Economy of Transnational Reciprocity" as the chapter that follows. The separate chapters by both editors are even more interesting because they draw not only on field research but also on personal lived and family experiences. All three editorial chapters reveal the book's overall aim to present "the ethical character

of economic activities and relationships in a transnational context," while also demonstrating that they "cannot be studied separately" from broader linkages (2025: 21). I perceive a tendency here, particularly within the anthropological community, to shift—after approximately thirty years of being "enchanted by migration"—toward everydayization of migration. High mobility relativises the concepts of "migrant" and "non-migrant." Migrants become long-time residents, and transnationality is just one of many "in-betweens." The multiscalarity discussed by Nina Glick-Schiller in the first chapter is very useful in such circumstances and can demonstrate that many phenomena associated with migration and diasporas have numerous other connections and cannot be reduced to the state-generated labels of "migrant" and "non-migrant."

The era of high mobility also puts the concepts of emigration and return migration into perspective. Perhaps in part because one of the editors, Vytis Ciubrinskas, has deep experience with Eastern Europe, the book highlights—more prominently than other publications—the circumstance that migrants are not always the poor and vulnerable, neither in their countries of origin nor in their destination countries. Return migration is becoming an increasingly important component of migration studies, and this book is living proof of that.

The publication is divided into five parts and nine chapters. The first part, "Reframing Concepts of Time, Space, and Capital," provides the theoretical and methodological base for the book; the subsequent parts, second "Embedding Reciprocity," third "Migrating Women and Social Positioning," fourth "Return and Remittances," and fifth "Migration as Crisis," are devoted to specific phenomena related to migration and transnationalism. In addition to Nina Glick-Schiller and Vytis Ciubrinskas, the authors of the individual chapters are Ana-Maria Cîrstea, Anna Horolets, Marta Kindler, Nóra Kovács, Violetta Parutis, Marta Buler, Jonathan D. Hill, Juan Luis Rodrigues, Roberto E. Barrios, and Alfredo Danilo Rivera. The publication covers a wide range of immigrant groups, particularly Haitians, Lithuanians, Romanians, Poles, Ukrainians, Hungarians, Venezuelans, and Guatemalans.

The afterword of the book wrote Tricia Redeker Hepner. In it, she highlighted, among other things, the historical dimension of transnationalism as a phenomenon that has long been an integral part of economic activities and human sociability. She also emphasised the distinct role of family ties in reinforcing transnationalism. Using other words, she returned to the concept of conjunctural multiscalarity, which Nina Glick-Schiller had highlighted as a methodological starting point in the first chapter, thereby suggesting a deeper dimension of transnationalism that transcends the boundaries of current events.

The publication includes a general index. Footnotes and a list of references are at the end of each chapter.

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Post-rural Revolution

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Haluzík, Radan. *Turbo-venkov: plné krajiny a prázdné domy (nejen) na Balkáně* [Turbo-countryside: Full Countries and Empty Houses (Not Only) in the Balkans]. Prague: Academia 2026, 371 pp., illustrations.

Radan Haluzík produced another masterpiece. After his *Proč jdou chlapi do války* (Why do guys go to war), Haluzík sought an explanation for the omnipresent phenomenon in the southern Balkans: a building boom paid for by hard currency earned in the rich countries of Europe, especially Switzerland, Germany, and Austria. Tito's communist Yugoslavia, aiming for accelerated modernisation, allowed labour migration to the West. Men (and, to a lesser extent, women) became *Gastarbeiter*, gained citizenship in the host countries, but oscillated between poor native countries and the rich West. What happened was a tremendous cultural change. Men returned home with money, which they invested in house construction in their original villages. Instead of fathers' shacks, western-style villas but without permanent inhabitants. Haluzík spoke for years with the carriers of this cultural upheaval and described in detail the quest for modernity, which could be characterised as a kind of rural revolution. He discovered that this trend is not limited to the southern Balkans but to many parts of the rural world. He visited the southern Caucasus, Romania, Mexico, Ukraine, Guatemala, Somaliland, Sri Lanka, Chechnya, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Ghana, Moldova, Indonesia, Ethiopia, and everywhere he registered a global Turbo-countryside. The whole rural world longs for a modern house with all the gadgets found in places of labour migration. The author of this stunning monograph and graphic wonder (I could not count the colour photographs which adorn practically every second page) managed to produce a persuasive volume.

The book is composed of ten chapters preceded by a prologue. The author writes about the part of the Balkans that has been associated with nationalism

and war. And there he realises that besides these negatives there are processes that „perhaps are more profound, more important, situated in the background, from which everything else is to a great extent derived" (p.11). The style of the first chapter is personal because the author converses with a real person from Kosovo, who struggled from misery to wealth, and compares his chances and dreams with the automatic ambition of someone who is part of a collective family. Two imaginary houses with two different cultural values. Eventually, it appears that one obligatory modernity of socialism breaks up into multiple modernities. These then spread around the world. Anthropological research of Radan Haluzík is a fascinating journey through people's homes and families, allowing the author to enjoy their hospitality and to understand their values and ambitions. At the same time, this research is part and parcel of „anthropocene contexts".

The second chapter analyses the neo-colonial character of communist Yugoslavia, which developed only where the state wanted. The poor rural regions of Yugoslav southwest that did not have the state were exploited until labour migration to the European West brought about development, expressed mainly by house construction, often the same houses built by brothers. That was accelerated by the disintegration of Yugoslavia, and paradoxically, also ethnic wars which accompanied it. Migration to the West was an answer to the inequalities created by unequal development. The Kosovo Albanians struggled into Schengen Europe with feverish speed. Remittance housing has been the reward. And also most migrants became citizens of the host countries. The crisis of the countryside is being resolved by the emancipation of the global periphery. It is not simply globalisation but, more concretely, taking wealth from the rich parts and investing it in the formerly poor parts of the world. The Wallersteinian centre-periphery absolute destiny has, of late, become a dynamic of catching up, at least in the form of consumption.

„Mad years" between guest labour in the West and the wealth of the returnees are the subject of the third chapter. It was the generation of self-made men who left their miserable villages and returned in Benz cars to build villas in the Swiss style high in the mountains of Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, and later also Albania. Labour is cheap in the Balkans. But most important is to save as much as possible and bring hard currency „home". That, of course, means suppressing oneself in permanent saving and having no leisure.

Next, the fourth chapter further develops the unique option: to build a splendid turbo-house that represents the whole clan. Building a representative house is the central point of life… and a „climax of global economic and cultural streams" visible in different parts of the world. There is also a paradox between the mimetism of westernisation and nationalism, local identity and tradition. The result is the

turbo-architecture marked by retraditionalism and syncretism. The extreme are castle-like structures or huge hotels. Glocalism can be expressed by a jokingly posed question of mixing snakes with hedgehogs.

Chapter five. Brothers build identical houses next to each other or in a single block composed of three, four, or five identical sections. Chapter six. Turbo-landscape or remittance landscapes. Turbo-folk, turbo-capitalism, turbo-urbanism and eventually turbo-culture. Chapter seven is about the Balkans on steroids, ecstasy and paradise dream made into reality. Chapter eight discusses selfmademanship of the post-rural revolution. There is a pride which characterises it. Turbo-marriages crown it.

In chapter nine, one reads about the political power behind the building boom, which often means ignoring rules and laws and creating an anti-system. Finally, in chapter ten, the author wonders what will become of this post-rural revolution and what the alternative is to the emptiness of houses built not only in the western Balkans but around the world. This countryside, now symbolising amassed wealth but leading to the dilemma of what next.

The book is adorned with dozens of splendid photographic illustrations, three hundred twenty-two notes reflected in hundreds of references to the relevant literature, Czech and English summaries, and a detailed index. The only disadvantage is that this wonderful book has no English, German, or French version yet. That may be another "next…"

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