

Iskra Geshoska

The Collective Alice, or, on Fear, Death, Multitudes, and Pain

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e-flux journal #119 — June 2021 Iskra Geshoska
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“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”
“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.
“I don’t much care where – ” said Alice.
“Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the Cat.
“ – so long as I get *somewhere*,” Alice added as an explanation.
“Oh, you’re sure to do that,” said the Cat, “if you only walk long enough.”
– Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

Every body has its dark side. That goes for individual and collective bodies alike. Every multitude, every community, every collective has its labyrinths with no way out. And this is so because of the confusion that arises betwixt notions of “singular” and “plural,” because of the evil spirit that hovers between “I” and “us.” In this very abyss, the multitude reflects itself – because the multitude has uniting but also destructive power. And this is the case with political movements: political thought from antiquity to the present has been founded on the differentiation between the one and the several, the many. But the multitude is both the one and the many at the same time.

This is the space in which the key political, but also ontological, battles of our present take place. The combat erupts from questions of: How to create a community within the arena of biopower without killing off the individual? How to create a collective, and not some zombifying crowdedness, while living in a democracy that is currently being transformed into a discursive category debated at conferences? How to create a body, a Hamletian body that will stand against and redefine the imposed lie of capitalism, of injustice?

The new nature of the political body resembles a singular, disoriented tissue that refuses its own organic unity. Civically, aesthetically, and economically speaking, it is a “body without organs.” It is a Hamletmachine, which, in Heiner Müller’s telling, is not Hamlet. “I don’t play a role anymore,” his protagonist says. “My words have nothing more to tell me. My thoughts suck the blood out of the images. My drama is cancelled. Behind me the set is being built. By people my drama doesn’t interest, for people it doesn’t concern. It doesn’t interest me anymore either. I won’t play along anymore.” Earlier in the play, when he was Hamlet, this Hamletmachine “stood on the coast and spoke with the surf BLABLA, at [his] back, the ruins of Europe.” He goes on:

The bells sounded in the state funeral,
murderer and widow a pair, the town
councilors in goose-step behind the coffin
of the High Cadaver, wailing in badly-paid
grief: WHO IS THE CORPSE IN THE MEAT-
WAGON'S STY / FOR WHOM IS THERE SUCH
A HUE AND CRY? / THE CORPSE IS OF A
GREAT / GIVER OF ESTATE. The pillar of the
population, work of his statecraft: HE WAS
A MAN WHO ONLY TOOK ALL FROM ALL. I
stopped the corpse-train, sprang the coffin
with my sword, broke it to the hilt,
succeeded with the blunt remains, and
distributed the dead progenitor FLESH
ENJOINS HAP'LY FLESH to the surrounding
faces of misery.¹

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It can be concluded that it is not easy to
understand the identity or anatomy of this non-
Hamlet, and all that he may represent. His is a
dying body, but one that is not fully aware of its
mortality.

Post-emancipatory epochs are
characterized by the entropy of traditional social
bodies. The new social body fights the old urge to
remain in a subordinate, largely comfortable
position. It aims to create a dynamic landscape
of relations, as opposed to the hitherto static

one. Long-established social bodies demarcate
the culture of silence. Emerging ones aim to
articulate what's been stifled.

We must learn what this new body, this
fresh tissue, can do. The tissue of the multitude
is in a constant state of avoidance: of the
tendency to drown in power, of the unpleasant
aspects of culture, of capitalist norms. Its flesh
cannot be ensnared by the imperatives imposed
by dominant cultural dogmas, because it cannot
fit into the molds cast by traditional political
hierarchies.

This projected, but also in some social
pockets realized, multitude is an open, expansive
network where all differences can be freely and
equally expressed. It offers tools for living and
working together through encounters with our
own disappearance. We live in a time of
omnipresence, of the cult of availability. All of
this emphasizes our disappearance from the
space of relations, and our absence from
ourselves. We float in the illusion that we are
embodied in our community; in fact, only our
shadows reside there.

The project of assembling a true multitude
demands a participative global society built on
equity. Today, however, rotting ideologies and a
particular, constant socioeconomic "state of



Alice in Wonderland ride, Disneyland, 1996. Photo: Ellen Levy Finch. CC BY-NC-SA/Wikimedia Commons.

exception” endanger the possibility of a democratic, multitudinous body. All of the above, along with our constant state of anxiety, is dictated by capital and a false sense of freedom. The latter has been manufactured on the premise of an emancipatory, democratic utopia, and has all the effect of a billboard slogan. In fact, what we may believe to be “freedom” is a continued state of captivity generated by various nodes of power.

The common social body is a viable matrix that resides within the very core of the production and reproduction of contemporary society. It carries the potential to create a new and alternative society, or at least new, alternative communities. These communities are comprised of an amorphous tissue that has yet to form a new body. Their armature should be built with entwined fibers of resistance and critical social inclusion. They are, in essence, friendships formed for the public good. In order to hold their shape, they must develop tactics for maintaining deep social insight and a willingness to combat all carcinogenic political phenomena. They are the nuclei of cells that will be mobilized for creative confrontation. Individual integrity and diversity will become a vital organ of the common social body.

And who or what exactly will form that type of body? Will it be molded from the “service industries” of capital, or will it crystalize under the pressure of marginalization? Is this body going to be the new Frankenstein’s Monster or Cabala’s Golem – both of them yearning for love and acceptance, each a paradigm of the excluded, the unwanted? Certainly, this new social body can be reduced to a productive organ of the eclipsing global figure of capital. But there is another possibility for autonomous organization through a particular “power of the tissue.” The power of the collective body is to transform itself.

Manufacturing the Illusion of Reality

To experience the real is to experience horror, which is often accepted as normal or even invisible. Horror is of course material and present, and our individual, social, and political bodies are shaped in large part by either responding to it or not. However, the current social body, especially as it functions under panoptical power, sometimes has an easier time accepting existent horror as simply an *illusion* of reality, as some unpleasant, walking daydream that never escapes the realm of the suppressed.

We need to see that our conceptions of reality have been hijacked by the unjust, fragmented social body designed for profit and by the absence of an applicable – not only discursive – idea of the commons. In other

words, we must clarify our collective vision and rearticulate the real. If we do not want to experience entropy on every social level, we need new modes of production (of life), of understanding the meaning and function of community. If we, the emerging social body, want to be situated in a reality based on political and even aesthetic solidarity, we need to create an autonomous zone of trust between individuals who share a vision of an emancipatory community that relies on mutual care. In the present world, in the life offered by our state and political apparatuses, we can see, as if through a palimpsest, the dominion of carelessness. The dream, then, is to create space for a multitude of concepts and opinions that will not be operatively blocked by dominant political narratives based on particular interests. This zone of trust can overcome the provincial and personal existential fears that plague the present. It can encourage a fearless step away from imposed political concepts and cultural behaviors, a horizon which will in turn move continually further away.

We must also create strategies for constructive confrontations. In the present era, the dominant social body wishes to avoid seeing radical otherness, precariousness, discomfort. This body wishes to be safe, comfortable even in its suffering. The illuminated billboards of today advertise the following slogan: better to be in submission than at risk. If others do not agree with us, we leave the conversation at that; we do not try to penetrate their otherness. If the other suffers, too, then that is their own problem. Death is the only force or topic that can bring us back from our shared, fear-induced coma. We must reinvent risk and adventure and work against certainty. It is of urgent importance to search for new, confrontational forms of political imagination.

The Unfinished Democratic Project

The new topography of economic, cultural, and political hierarchies transcends national borders. Today, processes of state legitimization rest upon the biopolitical productivity of power. We need to find a way to recognize the warning signs of new and extant forces that drive injustice and internal socioeconomic and cultural tensions. In such vigilance we can recognize the potential of our contemporary world. We live in a state of global apartheid. It is not only a system of exclusion, but also a productive system – one that produces representations of power. This is common for developed, “democratic” spheres full of discourse dedicated to equality, inclusion, diversity. However, the language of democracy is often inapplicable to reality, and it remains on the level of populist advertisement.



Robert Wilson, *Hamletmachine*, Kunsthalle, 1986, Hamburg. Photo: Friedemann Simon.

Democracy has remained an unfinished project throughout modernity, trapped in its fragmentary national and local forms. The processes of globalization in recent decades have only added to its challenges. The primary obstacle to democracy, however, is the permanent state of exception mentioned above. Therefore, the dream has been irretrievably lost, a project with pieces strewn and buried under panoptical weapons and security regimes.

Global society is being read as a regime of global security. And of course, political scientists say that existing nation-states and the old international order can no longer protect us from the threats facing our world today. They maintain that various new forms of sovereignty need to be created in order to manage the conflict between the world and itself. None of their arguments, however, allows for a full realization of the concept of democracy, since they all preserve the organization of social elements in an organic political body, thus inescapably reducing freedom for action, and establishing hierarchies among them. The democratic multitude cannot be a political body – not in its modern shape, at least.

We Are Afraid, So What?

I can't stand fear. I hate being afraid. There is only one way to free yourself from fear. It leads to its core.

– Peter Hoeg, *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow*

Let us not deceive ourselves: we are afraid. Very much afraid. We tremble like cherry blossoms in the wind at the very thought of fear itself. And because of that, we cannot even recognize fear, articulate it, name it. We are also afraid of the absence of fear.

At present, we live in cruel times in which market parameters are also applied to practices of ontological exchange – of identities, thoughts, and feelings. The psycho-dynamics of this exchange determine the paths our lives take. And this journey goes by extremely fast. This speediness produces an even bigger emptiness, where we are losing exactly what we are trying to exchange. Enticed by the mystery of new individualisms, we have tripped and fallen down a rabbit hole. At this moment, a collective, or if you wish, cloned, Alice rules the roost. She is endlessly reflected in microscopic prisms that she hopes will clearly reveal all aspects of her journey. Hers is a quest to make distinctions between communities and mobs, between critical and creative resistance to the silently, democratically, and consensually accepted suppressive concepts of social order. She still

proceeds, intent on creating maps of specific trajectories that will lead to a common space. Alice's journey this time is not in Wonderland, but in the land where our longing and our bodies are thrown on the garbage heap of economic and political violence. Alice finds herself in the infinity of emptiness, in a hall of mirrors showing crooked images of reality instead of what she'd wished to see. In these reflections, reality is simulated through a false overcrowding of activities, actions, products, "projects," "works" – all sorts of engaged acceleration. And the rabbit is always late and never manages to get to the most important tea party. And he is confused because the celebration is still going on, but without him. Fear has become the only consistent thing that can retrieve and construct the stories we tell about our wholeness, about the justification of our existence here and now – our avowals that we are not virtual, that our lives are not phantasms, that we are not writing them out by following certain commands. And nothing but the fear of our own impermanence feels more fitting to provoke our reflections on community. Nothing is more disturbing than the entropy of the idea that the community is property jointly owned by the subjects that join in it.

In the cauldron of this entropy of identities and in the semantic worthlessness of their definition and naming, we are left only with fear. The fear we are aware of stands against the fear that is not yet articulated and is suppressed. We refuse to consider it the principal force behind the evil done in its wake. As such, fear has become one of the most exciting emotions, a refuge from our endless, sorrowful drifting from birth to death. By knowing our fear, we get stronger, we get nobler, we overcome it, while the Other, for whom this fear remains the single motor for practicing power, paradoxically weakens. Fear can provoke an illusion that simulates a longing for life. Sometimes we stoke fear by not facing it and resolving it in the first place. Fear activates the feeling that we are alive, that we have a kind of motive for living. But we fail to notice that this fear is, in fact, our death.

But what kind of fear are we talking about? We are talking about a fear of the anesthetized man who has distanced himself from everything that can make him face himself, the Other, or even the very meaning of FEAR itself, laid bare and recognized. The man who does not know that he is afraid is like a crystal glass on the verge of being broken into a thousand pieces with a single touch.

And therefore, His Majesty, FEAR, remains enthroned. The present is marked by a lack of

communication, or to put it more correctly, an onslaught of hypertrophic, empty communication codes, charged with high-frequency public and private noise, with the rhythm of indifference keeping the beat. We're locked in a struggle to invent an apathetic, automatized, "pleasant" coexistence that is supposed to camouflage the discontents of culture. Fear becomes the second name for the thing that is to remind us, not of life, but of being alive.

We are afraid of making decisions, of travelling, flying, staying put, being jolly, crying, of loving, of commitments, of looking at ourselves through the eyes of the Other, of being gentle, different, silent, saying "no," saying "yes," of confrontation, of standing up. We are afraid of freedom although we keep summoning it and dreaming about it (but we say to ourselves, it is all right, it should stay there, in the sphere of the unconscious, because it is easier to be subjugated than free – freedom demands responsibility and love!). We hate terrorism and violence, but we would not know what to do without them. We are appalled by the ruthlessness of political crime, but we say to ourselves, woe betide if we are to deal with

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ourselves and our evil, and not with the unconscionable stupidity of others. We fear that the film tape of our life will be clumsily cut by some bad editor during the most important sequence – the scene that was going to finally show our true face, in soft focus. And while fearing, we hide our fear behind the cloak of fearlessness. We "cover up" all the fears mentioned above by persistently and repeatedly practicing them in vain.

Fluidity and Democratic Socialism

We know that the fluid life we lead is a result of inconstancy, taking place in a situation of sustained uncertainty. The hardest and most acute concern that haunts the fluid life is the anxiety that one will not keep pace with time, with swiftly changing events – that one will miss the sell-by date, that one will be overcrowded by the things one owns but no longer needs, that one will miss the moment that signals a change in direction. This fluid life is an endless string of new beginnings – and for that very reason, the ends come quickly too.

Disjointedness, incoherence, and surprise are common phenomena. We might not even be able to live without them anymore; they have become inherent to our sense of self and



Stanisław Lem Garden of Experiences, Czyżyny, Kraków, Poland. Photo: CC BY 3.0/Wikimedia Commons.

community. Our warped conception of joy can no longer be fed with anything else but sudden changes and new stimuli. We cannot stand anything that lasts.

That is why fluidity is the other determinant, for better or for worse, that shapes our bodies, our communities. Our being fluid is a suitable metaphor to help us understand the nature of the present, which is, by many indicators, a new stage in the history of modernity. We spill out, we diffuse, we leak, we melt. And thus, we discover the cracks and crevices in the body of life through which we manage to escape from the unpleasant and uncomfortable, from radical otherness, perhaps undamaged. This process of leakage and escape stands in contrast to the experience of the “solid” bodies among us – those which are, in biopolitical terms, desirable, “healthy,” incontestable, and which don’t ruin the perfect, imagined backdrop of society’s stage. Solid bodies do not have critical capacities and they ignore the fact of our universal finitude. By facing the finiteness, we, the less solid, face the fragility of the community, the fact of losing our loved ones and values. Contemporary times have found solid bodies in a particularly advanced stage of denial and decomposition.

How to address all of this decay in our midst? The key idea behind democratic socialism, which could help us resolve many dilemmas (without, one hopes, becoming the new religion), is to have institutions (including educational institutions and modes of political thinking) that enable individuals to lead their lives in full recognition of their dependence on others and on collective projects. And it is crucial for democratic socialism to have institutions in which people participate, because we *recognize ourselves and our freedom* in their shape. This participation – including in the care work we acknowledge as necessary for the maintenance of our society – should not be forced, but rather motivated by our active commitment. The primary task of our democratic society is to be organized in such a manner as to motivate us to contribute and transform its current life span, owing to the fact that we have been educated to fulfil our spiritual freedom. This fulfilment must also include the opportunity to criticize or reject the preestablished forms of participation. Just as the institution of marriage is not an institution of freedom unless it allows for the legal possibility of divorce, democratic socialism as an institution of freedom must also offer a practical possibility to refuse to partake in a given form of life. Otherwise, our participation will not be free, but a result of material concerns.

Together or Alone

Nothing appears more suitable and more necessary in this moment than the reconsideration of the notion of community. The old idea of community as shared property is problematic at best. The fluid modernity we inhabit consists of societies in which conditions change faster than their members can imagine, faster than it takes improvised modes of functioning to consolidate into habits and routines. These fluid contemporary communities, just like fluid life, cannot maintain the same shape, nor keep moving in the same direction.

Eric Hobsbawm noted: “Never was the word ‘community’ used more indiscriminately and emptily than in the decades when communities in the sociological sense became hard to find in real life.”² He proceeds to say that people look for groups to belong to, temporarily or permanently, in a world in which everything else moves and shifts and nothing else is certain. And at the very moment when the community collapses, identity is invented. The community is a home that, for the majority of people, is just a fairy tale rather than the reality of their personal experience.

What is the confusion, then, that arises with respect to the community and the individual – what is the trap? To be an individual means to be unlike anybody else. To be an individual means “I am what I am.” The problem with this is that the “others that are the same,” and from whom you cannot differ, are the very same people who incite you to be different. This is what we call a community, a society, in which you are only one of many members, only one in the mass of people, known and unknown, who expect you and everyone you know to possess undeniable proof that you are individuals, made “different from others,” either by someone else or by yourself. In the society of individuals, it is expected that everyone should be an individual. But paradoxically, not only are differences completely annulled, but everyone is also exceptionally similar to each other. They have to follow the same life strategy and use shared, recognizable, and readable signs that convince others that they are actually acting as individuals. They announce their autonomy, in other words, by the book.

Individuality belongs to the “spirit of the crowd” and to the demands imposed by that crowd. To be an individual means to be similar to everyone else among the many – even identical to everyone else. Under such conditions, when individuality is a universal must and everyone’s burden, the only thing one can do to be different and truly individual is to try not to be an individual, and that is indeed very hard. This is the Gordian knot of the present – an almost unsolvable problem. It is not only logically contradictory; it is also a practical task whose

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solution haunts us from cradle to grave. We have no choice but to follow the path that will cause us to probe deeper inside ourselves, which appears as the best refuge in an already overcrowded and noisy world of experiences that resembles a marketplace. We seek to wander inside ourselves, unpolluted and intact, untouched by external pressures.

Individuality is the final product of societal transformation. The rise of individuality marks the progressive weakening of the dense network of social relations, and this marks the loss of the power of the community or the loss of interest in the normative regulation of its members. This normative emptiness is filled with a new ordering of the social space that leaves out of its focus all interpersonal relations, as well as the microworld of closeness and directness.

Responsibility and the Daimonic as Political

The relation between secrets and responsibility, that is to say, between the mysterious/sacral and responsibility, is perhaps of key importance in the articulation of the conditions under which those of us interested in fostering an emergent social body are now trying to build community. Many philosophers, Martin Hägglund among them, warn of the danger of the daimonic (divine) as a sort of plundering whose effect, and sometimes paramount purpose, is to remove all responsibility – that is, to cause a loss of the meaning of responsibility and to annul our awareness of it.

We humans tend to incline towards the daimonic, to the authoritarian, to the concept of “*deus ex machina*,” and we do all of this in order to avoid responsibility. The daimonic must be correlated with responsibility – a relation that does not initially exist. The daimonic is first defined through irresponsibility, or, if you wish, through the absence of responsibility. It belongs to a space where the command *to be responsible for* has not echoed yet: the call for being responsible for oneself, for one’s actions and thoughts, for the other, has not been heard yet. The genesis of responsibility is not related to the history of religion or to religiosity. It should instead be analyzed in relation to the genealogy of the subject who says “I,” to the genealogy of the relation of this “I” to itself as an instance of freedom, of uniqueness, and of responsibility, of the relation to itself as an existence before the other – others with their endless alterity, the ones who see without being seen, but also the ones whose endless goodness *gifts* an experience that can be reduced to *gifting death*. To gift death: this expression is equivocal.

Trapped in historicity, we can ask ourselves whether the communities that “read”

themselves based on national identity can perceive their own history as a history of responsibility, illuminated by pain. Is historicity the idea that kills the political and annihilates the aesthetic? If a historian of national identities fails to interrelate historicity with responsibility, for all that this history tells of – which is typical, for example, of Europe, and perhaps of all humanity – this historian will reveal the defeating fact that historical knowledge is used to mystify, block, and satiate all questions, all foundations, but also all abysses. In the very heart of our history, our present, and perhaps also our future, there exists one such abyss – a huge cleft that opposes the longing for change, emancipation, and a redefinition of all quandaries regarding our history, to the political and ethical responsibilities of the community.

The Ending Is an Open Work

Last night I dreamt about reality. What a relief it was to wake up!
– Stanisław Lem

Oblivion, rejection, erasure, and effortless replacement – these are the new paradigms for survival, for sparing us from bare life. And for this very reason, this life could be characterized as the story of a constant, uninterrupted string of endings.

The paradigms we live by in our societal, cultural, political, and even artistic spaces are the following: creative destruction, uncertainty as value, and instability as fear and motivation. The most contemporary survival skill is a sort of acceptance of disorientation, immunity to fainting, adjustment to vertigo. It is clear that our new collective body does not foster, but is rather a result of, inconstancy; it moves fluidly to occupy its place in a continuous state of uncertainty. In this space we must create an alternative collective body, one that squirms and cries in pain. In the maelstrom of death we must build new models of community – autonomous zones of trust.

The world is at war again. This is not a traditional conflict between sovereign political entities, that is, nation-states; there are new, supranational forms of sovereignty – a global empire that has changed the forms and nature of war and of political and economic, and even aesthetic, violence. War has become an immanent part of the quotidian, and it is in communication with infinity.

Beyond the End

As Giorgio Agamben emphasizes in his *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, there is nothing more important in times of oppression

and unbearable confrontation with bare life than to become a witness, archiving the memory of suffering.

Bearing in mind the political, cultural, and economic context in which we live, which produces a meaningless void in a flood of action and information, it seems all the more important to become responsible witnesses to the hidden traps in our societies. We are losing ourselves in this void, even as we work to renew the idea of the commons, community, and togetherness. The societies in which we live inflict “noble,” invisible humiliation, violence, and even tyranny (in addition to the very visible versions of these). Witnessing and making visible all of the tools of suffering is not a step toward resentment and revenge, but rather a foundation for launching a constructive battle against what Virginia Woolf terms “the false tyranny of plot.” Since we inhabit the very core of several overlapping tyrannies (capitalist, ecological, climate, populist), with foreseeable complications but unforeseeable resolutions, it is our duty to be authors, artists, and creators not only of resolution but also of complications. We must not allow anyone else to create our own tyranny of plot. We must remain a creative, authorial, and conceptual step ahead of the tyrant.

In the early stages of the transformations that produced today’s world, young Karl Marx noted in one of his secondary-school essays that at sunset, moths fly toward the lights inside people’s houses. When imagining what our contemporary light-in-the-dark might be, what comes to mind are the individuals and small groups appearing all over the world with a still-hushed but extremely important voice for the voiceless, for a more just society. And indeed, the attraction of night-lights grows proportionally with the darkening of the external world.

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Heiner Müller, *Hamletmachine and Other Texts for the Stage*, ed. and trans. Carl Weber (Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1984), n.p.

2

Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World 1914–1991* (Vintage, 1996).

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