When we imagine the social world, we tend to see individuals: you, me, others, engaging in relationships with each other. And when we abstract away the relations, the individual remains, as the somewhat quaint condition of the possibility of relationality itself. The individual, in other words, has a certain ontological primacy and epistemological privilege in our way of thinking. It is quite a natural way of thinking...for us. What else is there but self-contained bodies moving through time and space, each sovereignly self-possessed in the completeness of its own fully individualized being?

But is this really self-evidently and exclusively true? Is the idea of society as the totality of individuals the only way of envisioning human sociality and culture, or is this only a historically determined but essentially contingent construct that serves a particular vision of the world? Or, to formulate it a bit more positively: what other dimensions and realities emerge when we shift from thinking in terms of individuals to thinking in terms of dividuals and their assembling into condividuals?

From this perspective, the individual starts to appear as a rather arbitrary reference point, a temporary and highly unstable snapshot of processes of individuation that are permanently becoming in between, within and beyond, above and below it. Here, rather than the unmoved mover or prime cause, the individual is the ongoing effect – hardly distinguishable from the roaring movement that produces it – of such processes of individuation, which are irreducibly common, belonging to no-one, or where one becomes many.
It is this kind of inquiry into the contemporary status of the individual and alternative concepts like the con/dividual that the two-day event Proper and Improper Names – Identity in the Information Society (Ljubljana, 17–18 October 2017) explored. Two of the lecturers directly addressed the notion of the trans and condividual (Marco Deseriis)\(^1\) as well as the dividual (Gerald Raunig, Every Beginning Is Dividual). The other two (Wu Ming 1 and Natalie Bookchin)\(^2\) did so indirectly, from the perspective of the political and artistic practices they engage in. The book that originally inspired this event – Improper Names: Collective Pseudonyms from the Luddites to Anonymous by Marco Deseriis – engages with the notion of the condividual by tracing the modern history and politics of collective pseudonyms and multiple use names, starting with the Luddite movement in early nineteenth century England, and ending with the hacktivist movement Anonymous in early twenty-first century global mediascapes.\(^3\) These social movements are conceptualized within a Deleuzian-Simondonian framework as forming transindividual assemblages whose collective force is made politically productive by open pseudonym and multiple use name practices. Raunig’s Dividuum: Machinic Capitalism and Molecular Revolution, Volume 1 is equally or even more Deleuzian in spirit, an idiosyncratic work that without much apparent effort travels between a reading of a scholastic logician and theologian from the 12th century (Gilbert de Poitiers) to Facebook as a prototypical instance of machinic capitalism, weaving them together into a whole punctured by interludes (called “ritornellos”) that are sometimes much longer than the actual parts.\(^4\)

These recent challenges to the category of the individual mark a new phase in the ongoing (post)Marxist project to formulate a truly (historical) materialist account of social being. But even more broadly, materialist thought has a long record of challenging the idea of the individual, both as a metaphysical

\(^1\) Marco Deseriis, Improper Names, Con-Dividual Subjectivities, https://vimeo.com/240680413.


category and as the conceived nexus of agency in modern society. Take Diderot’s theoretical and literary commentaries, where philosophical notions of identity and the individual already appear as remnants of archaic metaphysical prejudices. In the ‘vast ocean of matter’ that is the universe, he states with regard to identity, ‘not a single molecule resembles any other, not a single molecule remains for a moment just like itself’. Idem for the idea of the individual: possessed in his dream by Diderot’s materialist delerium, d’Alembert asks his philosophical interlocutors: ‘Don’t you agree that in nature everything is bound up with everything else, and that there cannot be a gap in the chain? Then what are you talking about with your individuals?’

Yes, what about individuals? Centuries later, it seems, our capacities of imagining the social world have hardly advanced in this respect: the notion of the individual is still at the center of most contemporary social and political ontologies (despite important differences in thinking about the individual, e.g. the liberal individual as an a priori given agency or as the social individual as intersubjectively constructed). Only to the world in its totality, Diderot suggests, could we truly attribute in-dividuality; but this God-like perspective is of course empirically unavailable. Instead, what can be rendered intelligible by an empirical/materialist gaze seems always already dividable; any supposed in-dividual bends before the materialist gaze that sees only transindividual assemblages that know nothing of that elusive, self-identical and fully individualized ‘personhood’. So in Diderot we already find an attempt to move beyond the ontology of the individual as the primary site of agency, toward an inherently recomposable and becoming ‘chain of being’ in which the individual is inscribed, and which continuously transcribes it into its other: a world where everything is irreducibly and catastrophically bound up with everything else, where everything is different yet nothing is truly unique, in a way that destabilizes and undoes the boundaries between self and other, or inner and outer, whose rigid differentiation is conventionally understood as constitutive of individuality.

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7  For this reading of Diderot, see Peretz, E., 2013. *Dramatic Experiments: Life according to Diderot*. Suny Press.
At first sight, the scientific materialism of Diderot and the historical materialism of Marx do not seem to have much in common. Yet I would argue that the deconstruction of classical notions of the individual is central to both. Marx’s critique of the individual must be understood in the context of his critique of German idealism (specifically the Hegelian kind) toward a proper materialist understanding of the historical social world. At the start of *The German Ideology*, Marx offers an outline of the fundamental methodological differences between idealism and materialism. The former is represented by the young Hegelians and their ilk, whereas the latter represents Marx’s own. In idealism, the determining relationship between material historical conditions and ideas grown in the soil of the mind – insofar as these material conditions come into view at all other than in the mystified and abstract form of ‘Society’ – is the exact inverse of materialism. This is the (in)famous topsy-turvy, *camera obscura* world that the Young Hegelians and Feuerbach-adepts thought they had overcome with their critique of Religion, but which Marx recognized was still present in these idealists themselves, mocking and sweeping them aside as so many ‘sheep in wolf’s clothing’.

As the starting point of a materialist approach that truly breaks with these forms of pseudo-critique, Marx offers as the first premise and ‘natural basis’ of all human history ‘the existence of living human individuals’. These ‘real individuals’ in their physical organization, in their social activity and the material conditions under which they live (natural or self-produced), can be ‘verified in a purely empirical way’ (contrary to idealism, which always involves mediations by the imagination that abstract from these real conditions). This phrasing reveals the strong epistemological claim and privilege of the materialist over the idealist method as Marx conceives it. In the process, the individual I or Subject as conceived by idealism (and ideologically, in the social ontology of bourgeois liberalism in classical political economy) is methodologically eliminated.

However, this does not mean that Marx eliminates the category of the individual as such; rather, the latter is rendered a ‘social individual’. As Gould argues in her work on the role of the individual within Marx’s social ontology,
Marx does seem to hold on to some notion of the individual as ‘an ensemble of social relations’: a being constituted through the totality of relations in which it is at any moment embedded.\(^8\) Marx seems to want to say that thinking materialistically means contextualizing the answer to the anthropological question ‘What is Man?’ as relative to the historically unique moment of human development seen from the perspective of its real conditions: the relational totality of individual activities. ‘As individuals express their lives, so they are [...] What they are, therefore, coincides with their production’.\(^9\)

This means that Marx’s individuals are never the abstract, atomistic, sovereign individuals that existed in the minds of liberals and classical political economists, or the humanist subject of the Rights of Man: ‘Marx famously shows in *On the Jewish Question* how the social form of the bourgeois subject is premised on an opposition between individual and social existence. In this oppositional relation the social appears to impinge on the primary autonomy of the individual, but the real delimiting power is actually the form of the individual itself – the “confined individual, confined to himself” – which constrains an expansive social or communal being into the isolated subject of private property’.\(^10\)

The philosophical discourse premised on the individual de-ontologizes these dimensions underpinning human sociality and culture. Instead, in Marx individuals are dissoluble into the relations they are engaged in: they are always already relationally defined to each other (in their social, economic, and political ‘intercourse’) and to the material conditions under and through which their activity takes shape. This materialist deconstruction of the individual as a ‘social individual’ opens up to a more radical conception of the transindividual and dividual character of these relations, to which Marx can only allude, given his position in a philosophical discourse unfit to fully

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accommodate its implications. That is, the emphasis on and primacy of material and relational becoming in Marx’s social ontology allows for a more radical reading of the first premise of materialism not from the perspective of the real or social individual but from the perspective of the transindividual or con-dividual assemblages that compose it.

Take for example the socialist German playwright Bertolt Brecht, who observed that in modern society it is in fact the mass that acts and reacts through the ‘I’, rather than the other way around. Echoing Marx’s notion of the individual as an ‘ensemble of relations’, for Brecht what philosophers refer to as the individual is actually ‘the sum of a certain number of tendencies’, in other words: a dividable part of a larger network of relations and ‘dividual aggregates’. Just as the masses are envisioned in terms of the individual when viewed from the perspective of the bourgeois ideology of autonomous personhood, so from the perspective of the masses does the individual appear as itself always already a mass, Brecht suggests. Consequently, rather than rescuing the individual person from the mass that surrounds it, ‘man does not become man again by stepping forth from the masses but by sinking deeper into them’.

Brecht links this idea of individuation through rather than despite the mass to a ‘Zertrümmerung der Person’ [the destruction or ‘shattering’ of the person] in industrial modernity, where: ‘[The person] falls apart, he loses his breath. He turns into something else, he is nameless, he no longer has any face [...].’ Whereas in liberal-bourgeois ideas of personal autonomy this name- and facelessness can only appear negatively, for Brecht the destruction of the person opens up to an inherently collective, ‘transpersonal’ realm pregnant with ever new modes of social, cultural and political individuation.

In the realm of culture and politics, such modes of individuation can be accommodated differently by distinct modes of authorship and writing, which

both Deseriis and Raunig reflect upon, in the form of the notion of dividual versus authoritative or communitarian modes of writing, and the history of collective pseudonyms or multiple use names, respectively. For Deseriis, such pseudo-names – like General Ludd, Luther Blissett or Anonymous – allow the multiplicity of what Raunig dubs ‘dividual writing’ to materialize, thus ‘bringing into expression the communal being that traverses and exceeds the individual’.13 The con/dividual character of social and cultural being must be instantiated/instituted to become politically legible and productive – and this is exactly what these names do. In Raunig’s terms: contrary to authoritative and communitarian modes of writing that posit a sovereignly circumscribed ‘I’ or ‘We’, which are both premised on the erasure of the multitude/multiplicity through whose exclusion alone it may constitute itself as a coherent Subject,14 dividual writing celebrates, and is constituted by opening up to, such multitudinal beings in between.

The notion of the condividual as the ‘“non-authorial author’ of such dividual writing was originally coined by Italian novelist and activist collective Wu Ming to describe their artistic and activist practices in a way that captures its modus operandi better than within the worn-out antinomy of the individual versus the collective, as ‘The multiple name cancels out the separation between the individual and the collective. It magically grants a share in the collective figure of the imaginary person, in which the movement and power of an invisible mass are embodied. The mass attains shape, becomes an active subject in the form of the imaginary person’.15 In such condividual writing practices, ‘the source of the written word ceases to be a subjective interiority

14 In accordance with Bordiga’s observation that ‘It is the attribute of the bourgeois world that all commodities bear their maker’s name, all ideas are followed by their author’s signature’ (Amadeo Bordiga, Sul Filo del Tempo), in Anti-Book Nicholas Thoburn shows that ‘The modern author arises from the polymorphous field of discourse as a means to confer authority and distinction on a concrete share of text, a work, and is concurrently projected back onto that work as its sole and unique source, whence arises his proprietary rights’ (Thoburn, N., 2016. Anti-Book: On the Art and Politics of Radical Publishing. University of Minnesota Press: 170).
and becomes instead the immersion in a polymorphous communal being, as authorial originality gives way to a kind of primary ‘creative plagiarism’, a ‘continual recombination and variation’ of cultural and existential materials that denies ‘any dichotomy between “collective” and “individual”’.\(^{16}\)

Returning to the question of the individual. Strangely enough, it is the exact or natural sciences that have led the pack in attempts to radically dissect the individual and the philosophical notions of selfhood and the idea of the person corresponding to it. Take Thomas Metzinger’s *Being No One*, according to whom no such things as ‘selves’ exist in the world.\(^{17}\) Similarly, Gilbert Simondon’s anchoring of the individual in transindividual processes of individuation takes its cue from these new scientific paradigms, including the cybernetic emphasis on matter as informational. Yet this scientific version of the transindividual dimensions of life immediately points to the problematic status of this ‘discovery’, given that such paradigm shifts cannot be understood independently of larger historical transformations of the capitalist mode of production, given the role of cybernetics in the cold war scientific-military-corporate complex, to take just one example.

In light of this, the notion of the dividual cannot be treated as radical in and of itself but must be approached with at least some skepticism as to the ‘politics’ of its ontological and epistemological claims, requiring a historical contextualization. As Appadurai has recently argued, global finance already operates on the level of the dividual, rather than the individual.\(^{18}\) Similarly, as Raunig points out, Facebook’s algorithm and the business model it serves revolves around the information that nests in between and springs from beyond distinct individual persons – aggregating digital traces of human-machine interactions that allows for the extraction of their economic surplus value. Although oriented toward what is individual and personal on an interpellative or ‘ideological’ level (what Wendy Chun recently called the ‘you’

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that is the central imaginary neoliberal subject of new media platforms), as an algorithmic assemblage of capture Facebook actually explodes the personal in a deluge of pseudonymized data points and patterns that exceed the individual, thus operating on a con/dividual level.

Does this mean the Deleuzian ontology of the dividual or condividual is tainted by these more dubious cybernetic ontologies of ‘the human use of human beings’, which shed the notion of the individual like a snake does its dead skin, in search of ever more sophisticated forms of control and parasitical value extraction that penetrate even further into the social fabric? This raises the question of the normative status of the con/dividual. Is it a utopian concept that can be temporarily instantiated through the use of multiple use names, as Wu Ming suggests? Or is it a more neutral concept that merely describes new ways of gaining access to and control over reality, as the global finance and Facebook examples above suggest? What these questions point to is the necessity of rethinking the site of contemporary political struggle not as a struggle between the liberal-humanist, bourgeois ideology of the individual and the proto-communist (con)dividual, but rather as taking place within the realm of the dividual. As the con/dividual dimension of things becomes more central in various domains, so does the question of how to appropriate it politically.

The problem with which radical leftist appropriations of the dividual are faced, it seems to me, is that the critical thrust of the concept of the (con)dividual still seems to largely derive its support from the critical deconstruction and dismissal of the classical possessive individual, understood as the sovereign Author of him or herself. But if indeed contemporary power has already surpassed the individual in its dominant mode of functioning, is this critique not rendered moot, destined to fight a rearguard battle?

Raunig’s conception of the dividual, for example, hinges on the intersection of an ontological claim concerning the nature of being as dividual in a strong,

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metaphysical sense, and a historical claim, equally Deleuzian in spirit, that in the capitalist ‘control society’ the dividual plays an increasingly pivotal role in the production of value and subjectivity. Consequently, his reimagining of the social as dividual is predicated on a variety of oppositional dualisms also Deleuzean in origin: vertical versus horizontal, linear vs a-linear, molar vs molecular, one vs many, etc. It is mostly to the use of these dualisms that the above-mentioned skeptical challenge has to be addressed.

If the title of the book expresses an opposition between machinic capitalism on the one hand, and molecular revolution on the other, but this opposition no longer straightforwardly aligns with the opposition between vertical and horizontal, molar and molecular, etc. – because machinic capitalism itself has become horizontal, molecular, i.e. is itself a kind of molecular revolution against its molar past self – then what is the subversive, critical force of horizontality, molecularity, and so on? Is molecular revolution more horizontal and more molecular than machinic capitalism? Is machinic capitalism the molecular forces of production but structurally inhibited by the molar form of the commodity, as in the Marxist contradiction between forces and relations of production? Yet rather than crying once again that ‘critique has run out of steam’, why not confront this irreducible ambivalence that characterizes the present conjuncture? If even on a social media platform like Facebook, ‘the habituation to machinic appendage concatenates with the machinic desire for total sharing’, what are the ways this alignment of emancipation with capitalist exploitation can be cut? Although quite unsatisfactory, all we can say for now is that the battle will have to be fought out in the raging middle.
