



BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Radical hospitality in a Berlin hackerspace

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Comment on Zigon, Jarrett. 2024. *How is it between us?: Relational ethics and care for the world*. Chicago: HAU Books.

Zigon begins with a proposal first outlined in his influential essay on post-Soviet Russia (Zigon 2007). We (this time taking a global viewpoint) are living through an unprecedented moral breakdown, caused at the conjuncture of interlocking crises, which serves as living proof that the dominant ethical paradigms have failed. The state of things thus urgently requires radical ethical renewal and concept creation. Whether or not one is in full alignment with this proposal for radical rupture and the existence of an interstitial present, it is rhetorically effective at teeing up his response—the need for an intrinsically “relational ethics” characterized by openness and attunement. In *How is it between us?* Zigon has offered a lucid, logical, simply illustrated, and at times very funny effort, to bring anthropology—not just as method but as *insight*—to bear on a wide range of contemporary human problems. The pithiness of Zigon’s presentation should not disguise what is at base a bold and ambitious world-bridging endeavor.

Building on a phenomenological approach, and twenty-five years of ethnographic fieldwork, Zigon’s relational ethics presents a counterpoint to what he calls a “container conception of the world” (2024: 4). Rather than arising through the interplay of ontologically stable entities and/or transcendent values, he offers that ethical life is inaugurated only at the moment of relation. What this looks like in practice is initially illustrated by his encounters with those involved in Harm Reduction programs, amidst the global war on drugs in North America and beyond. Assuming the basic premise that those ad-

dicted to drugs cannot be compelled in any singular direction, and thus in order to reduce harm one must receive and respond to them as they currently are (while introducing salubrious practices such as syringe exchange), this world operates, Zigon theorizes, through an ethics of openness and attunement. In other words, the most ethical course of action, in this world and enlarged to others, is the one creatively formulated in the very process of exchange, by way of an intertwining he names “ecstatic relationality” (2024: 7). Rather than filling a container, ethical life is a temporary achievement of comfortably occupying this space of betweenness: elsewhere called “radical hospitality” (2024: 89).

In Chapter 4, “What is data (ethics)?,” Zigon addresses the phenomenon of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019): an economic model that emerged in the first decade of the twenty-first century, and now substantially shapes the circulation of data across the world. The involuntary collection of personal data has been widely viewed as problematic, and has been subject to various legislative measures designed to uphold its apparently natural antidote—privacy. There is, however, as surveillance scholars have long observed, a deeper problem with privacy itself as an effective political concept (Stalder 2002; Solove 2008; Peacock 2025b). Indeed, already by the late 1990s, surveillance was proclaimed to be at a “maximum” and privacy at its “end” (Norris and Armstrong 1999; Whitaker 1999). The “death” of privacy is a common refrain in this field. One of the enduring frailties of privacy as a concept can be found in its persistent imbrication



with logics of possession, and therefore its ideological overlap with those corporate entities who give rise to its assault. Corporations that thrive through surveillance capitalist business models, as Zigon and others note (Birchall 2021), increasingly frame the discourse on privacy—which is rather like putting the fox in charge of the henhouse. While it is not impossible that some rights would be established, it is more than likely they would take strongly attenuated form.

What Zigon adds to this already well-seasoned debate, is to examine the philosophical foundations that underpin both the “data-centric industry” (2024: 78) and some forms of privacy advocacy. These are, in order: 1. Data are information-facts; 2. Data holds integrity prior to its extraction as “raw material”; and 3. Protection against this extraction is consequently the best defense (2024: 75). Instead, turning towards the Latin roots of the word data (*datum*) meaning that which is given, Zigon emphasizes the intrinsic relationality of data itself, which means that privacy as “an ethics of the fence or wall” is perennially doomed to fail (2024: 86). In this chapter, Zigon clarifies some of the structural weaknesses that continually bedevil the right to privacy response, as it has appeared in those countries historically influenced by Lockean logics of possession: which besides Britain, particularly includes Canada, Australia, and the United States.¹ If, however, we turn towards regions of the world with alternate political genealogies, privacy starts to look slightly different, and it is to one example of such difference that I will now attend.

c-base

From 2019 onwards I have been working with privacy advocates in Germany to explore the anthropological basis for the comparative strength of privacy as a value in the region. Though distributed in cities all over Germany (especially the former West), there is a particular concentration of active associations and individuals in the capital, Berlin. Yet even within this cultural epicenter, there is a further one: a hackerspace on the banks of the River Spree called c-base. c-base (always written in lower case), was founded in the years following reunification in a shared apartment in the city, before becoming a registered association (*eingetragener Verein*) in 1995, and moving to its current location in Kreuzberg

in 2001. As part of the fieldwork, I spent some time in c-base, normally at night when it comes most alive.

Its origin myth is far more intricate than the potted history above, as for members c-base is really a “space station” (*Raumstation*) that crashed to earth 4.5 billion years in the future. Its oft-repeated mantra “Be Future Compatible,” continually betokens its own time travel. As a space station, there is a key double entendre around the word space that operates in both German and English. On the one hand, it entails a commitment to otherworldliness—at once material and ideological. Even more importantly though, c-base is a place that *provides* space. It is this provision of space free of charge, with a technical infrastructure that “lobby groups envy us for” (Markus Beckedahl, cited in Last, Suhr, and Fichtner 2015: 2), to all kinds of associations, meetings, and events that positions c-base in such a pivotal location for privacy advocacy in Germany and beyond. It is associated with the founding of the European Digital Rights initiative (EDRi) and the German Pirate Party, as well as many other less well-known associations. It is a place for after-parties and late night performances, or developing a media campaign against facial recognition software. Here I will demonstrate how the activities in and around c-base offer an ingenuous expression of what Zigon calls relational ethics, as well as departing from it in ways that may be instructive.

Those at c-base emphatically share Zigon’s antipathy to a container conception of the world. At one point Zigon identifies this with twentieth-century ideas of community as “localized, totalized, and closed” (2024: 88), and various signifiers around the hackerspace indicate its opposition to the expression this took in Nazi Germany. This closed conception of community has long been associated with the image of the circle. The circle was a favored metaphor of German Idealism, and is still used today to signify sealed societies.² The primary symbol in c-base is, as a contrast, the letter c—an open circle. The almanac captures its meaning in the following way:

It stands for the half-open, incomplete form of the circle, and signifies curiosity, attention, and progress. It represents the c-base cosmos and gives an overview

1. Zigon raises the ghoulish specter of John Locke’s persistent philosophical legacy on p. 80.

2. The circle appears frequently as a metaphor in the writings of Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. More recently, it has come to denote secrecy and digital enclosure (see Eggers 2014).



of the activities and possibilities of the station (Last et al. 2015: 189, my translation).

Openness is a key concept in *How is it between us?*, at one point elided with freedom, as it is only openness that renders people receptive to being-in-the-world. This case for an openness which is halved, however, the qualification that is placed around full openness, is also crucial to understanding how c-base operates, and is simultaneously responsible, I suggest, for its remarkable endurance over three transformative decades. Let us examine this in more detail.

(Half-)openness

c-base can reasonably be described as a radically hospitable place, a hospitality often initiated with a tour. On this tour you may be shown things—the bar area with leather sofas and a glitterball, the kitchen, the moving light display manufactured from glass bottles, the workshops for making things on the floor below. You may, at the same time, be told things about the space and how it views itself. Among the most important is that it considers itself to be a “social experiment.” This means that it is not a place where social relations and their outcomes can be known or defined in advance. Only the context can. A collective can (with permission) choose to meet at the hackerspace on a regular basis, such as every first Tuesday of the month at 8 p.m., and these meetings are reliably open, advertised in the online calendar, and emphatically without pre-registration. While this spacetime is known and repeated, its social constitution is on the contrary characterized by intrinsic uncertainty. The meetings themselves, meanwhile, are strictly participatory. There is little standing back and watching events unfold. If you attend a meeting you constitute a part of its substance, and through this its social potential. For example, at one meet-up for those interested in a particular federated system for encrypted messaging, my questions about the system shaped part of its unfolding, and the desire of a group of young students who had spontaneously traveled from another city to visit the celebrated hackerspace, constituted another part.

Creating the context for social experiments is acknowledged to arrive with risk. When you place people together in ways that are inherently uncertain, bad things as well as good may happen. One of the best-known negative episodes occurred in 2013, when a member of the hackerspace painted a Japanese cartoon associated with

rape culture on the inside of the main toilet door. Though the artist was female, that male members outnumbered female around the time by approximately four to one, may have shaped the context within which the painting occurred (Last et al. 2015: 59). When it became a subject of controversy, referred to as “toilet door gate” (*clotuergate*), and was removed, it then became an articulated part of c-base’s ongoing biography. The controversy was given a Twitter account, discussed at that year’s most consequential German hacker conference, the Chaos Communication Congress, and documented in the almanac. While the episode is indubitably disturbing, and speaks to gendered tensions that are voiced every so often in the world of German privacy advocacy, in a non-experimental alternative it could have been rewritten, or worse, silenced. The willingness of c-base to “dwell” with the discomfiting event and its ramifications (2024: 20)—as Zigon following Martin Heidegger might describe it—by contrast, allows it to be part of c-base’s ongoing relationality, and thus potential for future difference.

Zigon’s emphasis is on ethics as an outcome of, rather than precondition for, social relationships. In his “relational ontology of withness” (2024: 5), what comes to matter is the possibility for an ecstatic exchange of relational being, accessed through embodiment. That c-base was originally formed out of friendships forged in a shared apartment, a relation, quite literally, of dwelling together, situates social relationality at the root of the enterprise. Decades later, I experience this ontology directly at one of the hosted meetings of a group oriented around planning and executing digital privacy campaigns. We gather around the large circular wooden table in the main lounge, and, without sharing names, are swiftly voting on matters concerning the life of the group. All those present possess an equal vote—even those there for the first time. After an hour or so, the members working through the agenda call us up onto our feet, and toward the outdoors area on the riverbank. We are going to play a game (*Kennenlernspiel*) to get to know each other better. Again, this does not entail sharing any biographical details, but rather assembling in a minimally verbal and mirthful physicality. The game consists of standing in a circle, with one person assuming an axial place in the center, who instructs those around to assume one of five positions, together with the two people standing either side of them. Two of these have a thematic link to surveillance. One of them—video surveillance—involves the person in the middle



cowering in a pose of mock anguish, shielding their face with their hands, while those on either side bear down on them with their index finger and thumb forming circles round their eyes in the shape of glasses. Another—James Bond—involves the person in the middle turning to profile, and clasping their hands together in the shape of an upwards-facing gun, while the two others bend their knees into lunges and point their gun arms straight. Two aspects of the game are intriguing. The first is their willingness to participate in a form of ecstatic relational being, well in advance of any discursive presentation of the self. The second, meanwhile, is the manifestation of what appears at first glance to be a political contradiction. On the one side, video surveillance is performed as threatening. On the other, an infamous fictional state spy is glamorized. At second glance, however, it sheds light on the substantive ethical life of this group and others. Not every form of surveillance sparks their political concern, only that which expressly arrives through recording technologies.

At this point my response modestly veers from Zigon's optic, a veering occasioned by the concept of the threshold. The centering of ethical life at the between, rather than in-between, repositions thresholds as places in themselves, indeed *the* places, where ethical life occurs.

Though the constituents of c-base fervently reject a container conception of the world, thresholds remain vitally important. The space and its environs rebound with them. There are the two archways one must pass through to reach the building from the street, each embroidered with different forms of wall art heralding some of the ideas and activities within. There are the front and rear doors, normally open, but which during COVID-19 become strict venues for pandemic monitoring, at which entry is permitted only to those presenting a vaccine certificate. Then inside the lounge, there stands the vast "c-gate" (see Figure 1) which can be disassembled and reconstructed in other locations. Nonetheless, the most charged threshold is the stairway that connects—and separates—the upstairs area from the downstairs area, which, outside the frequent tours, is accessible only to those who are registered members of c-base e.V. Indeed a non-member carries their own specific title—"alien." Before they descend the stairs, an alien might be given a lanyard with a picture of an alien on it to wear, and upon passing into the darkest and deepest caverns beneath, trigger an "alien alarm" which sounds to members the presence of the unregistered. While this may sound intensely exclusionary, it is better thought of as a satire of exclusion, because membership of c-base is, in principle,



Figure 1: The c-gate inside c-base, Berlin, Germany. Photograph by e-punc.



open to everyone willing to contribute the €17 monthly fee through which it is financially sustained.

This halving of openness occurs, therefore, through the ever-present possibility of threshold closure, of turning the permeable letter “c” back into a hermetic ring. This can happen in different ways. Though membership is open in the first instance, there is a six-month probation period during which the board members of c-base may decide not to renew a person’s subscription. c-base—like many other associations and spaces in the arena of German privacy advocacy—is also in possession of a written code of conduct. It is available on their website, and is sometimes circulated to those using the space in advance. If members feel that the code has been breached, the offender in question may legitimately be expelled from the venue. This sanction of exclusion, deriving from a set of what Zigon, following Joel Robbins, calls “transcendental” values (2024: 3), those agreed upon before relationality arises, would constitute c-base as unethical, or at least as another expression of ethical paradigms that have failed. If this is true, then perhaps this is where a distinction can be drawn between the ethical and the political. In conclusion I would like to briefly touch on what the value of threshold closure might be for privacy advocates, and what the risks of full openness are for political life in general.

Conclusion

The first decades of the twenty-first century witnessed a variety of meaningful experiments in open social movements. The so-called “networked” movements for alter-globalization (Juris 2008), for democracy (Graeber 2013; Mitchell, Harcourt, and Taussig 2013), and for freedom of information (Coleman 2014; Peacock 2025a) demonstrated a capacity to reach rapidly across vast geographical distances, and were enveloped in a flurry of optimism around digital networking more generally. While it would be churlish to say that these movements failed because they had no telos to be implemented, it is a fair assessment that, at least so far, their structural consequences have been muted. As I and other ethnographers have documented, many of their most transformative effects took place at the level of the subject (Razsa 2013, 2015; Peacock 2025a). The adversaries these networked movements faced were many. A political environment permanently in a state of openness and attunement renders itself vulnerable to state and corporate espionage (Krøijer 2015), to agent provocateurs,

and to the inpouring of issues caused by deprivation endemic to mass societies at large, to name but a few—all of which can weaken or fracture the vital connections around which these movements flourish. In light of these experiences, the possibility of threshold closure may take on a prophylactic role, preserving spaces for counter-hegemonic relational ethics to arise.

Today’s anthropology might be described as undergoing a “relational” moment. Heavily diminished are the major transcendental categories such as “kinship” or “religion” that segmented the writings of previous generations. In this context, Zigon offers a thoroughly timely intervention that builds on several decades of anthropological thought more generally, and demonstrates its pressing contemporary relevance. Privacy is another transcendental term that has been subject to its own questionable comparative investigation (Moore 1984), and still remains a powerful trope in other fields, and particularly in public spheres. Giving privacy the relational treatment, therefore, is a valuable move. Allowing for the halving of openness, of obstructing the constant flows upon which surveillance capitalism and other forms of hegemonic power depend, is another.

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