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Activists and Experiential Entanglement in Russian Labor Organizing

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Research on labor activism in Russia asks whether organized workers can overcome the quiescent legacy of trade unionism in the USSR and after its collapse (Ashwin 1999; Crowley and Ost 2001; Crowley 2002; Gorbach 2019; Mandel 2000; Vinogradova, Kozina, and Cook 2012). Despite major strikes in 1989–1990 and at the end of the 1990s—particularly by coal miners—in the long term, trade unionism has failed to articulate key worker grievances effectively. A paradox emerged: workers proved they could mobilize and had structural power, but this did not translate into associational leverage to ameliorate the 1990s "Shock Therapy" economic reforms.[1]

The disparity between structural and associational working-class power remains notable in Russia (Hinz and Morris 2017). Federative and trilateral bodies linking state and society have been unable to force any kind of class compromise from state or private capital since 2000. One reason has been the effective co-option of existing unions by the state along with the draconian 2001 Labor Code. Nonetheless, what I call "plural" forms of labor protest remain widespread—including many forms of action short of a strike that take place in waves, not only during periods of economic distress and not only in unprofitable enterprises (Greene and Robertson 2009; Vinogradova, Kozina, and Cook; 2012).

As illustrated by Irina Olimpieva's chapter in this volume, unions officially affiliated with Russia's main trade union umbrella organization, the Federation of Independent Russian Trade Unions (FNPR), are cowed, unsure of their role, and sensitive to further erosion of their chimerical institutional power. They are unwilling to advocate for workers. While still Europe's largest federative union,

with approximately twenty million members in 2018, FNPR rarely initiates strikes or protests, despite the increase in labor protests elsewhere in Russia. These bureaucratic organizations reject class conflict, and their track record in voicing worker demands is poor (Olimpieva 2012). Since their founding in 1990, they have defended their institutional "partnership" position, rather than deal with the deterioration in conditions, pay, and security (Ashwin and Clarke 2002; Mandel 2004; Vinogradova, Kozina, and Cook 2012).

At the same time, an atmosphere hostile to labor organizations in Russia cannot completely extinguish labor strife. Labor protests elude the repressive code or use "hidden transcripts" of resistance, individualized tactics, or online campaigns. Key sectors like auto and service industries, with intense exploitation and fewer traditional unions, represent niches for new activist organizers. This chapter focuses on two examples of grassroots labor activism: the establishment and organization of a new independent union, MPRA (Interregional Trade Union Workers' Association), at the Kaluga Volkswagen plant after 2007 and the recent attempts to organize food couriers in Moscow, many of them migrants.

These examples contribute to our understanding of activism by drawing attention to long-term effects of activist learning and experience; the propagation of activism across domains of contention (from electoral politics to labor relations); and the significance of horizontal category networking ("netness") as a characteristic of Russian activism.

The rest of this chapter is organized as follows: The next section develops my concept of entanglements to explore the emergence of labor activism. Second, I trace labor mobilization in Russia after 1991 to contextualize the appearance of new activist unions and their members. Using this framework, I sketch the successes and failures of this new union approach using the case study of Volkswagen (VW) in Kaluga, where I previously carried out research. I reinterpret the Kaluga materials to trace the flows of activist experience as well as their dispersed networks and mobility. I then compare the Kaluga case to the ongoing food-courier activism in Moscow, highlighting similarities and differences. The final section discusses the themes of activist "experiential entanglement." My empirical materials are mainly from two sources: the VW case rests on numerous interviews with activists, as well as participant observation of auto-plant workers, largely from the years 2009–2010 and 2013. The second case—of the Moscow couriers—comprises mainly virtual ethnography from summer 2020.[2] These materials are interviews, Telegram channel announcements, and other online discussions by different self-proclaimed unions purporting to represent couriers. I also make use of

media reports and social media account posts—particularly from VKontakte and YouTube.

Conceptualizing Entanglements

Netness (and the accompanying term *catness*) derives from Charles Tilly's (1978) proposed association between relations and identities in contentious politics.[3] *Netness* refers to the knitting together of embedded and reciprocal social relations. Anthropologists also propose *netness* to describe the entangled connectivity of loose, easily collaborating, value-generating nodal points in any network (not just human ones)—often facilitated by technology (Case 2011).

Catness (*category-ness*) refers to the effects of shared identities. A network might have high netness, such as with a group of close friends, but lack catness because of quite different personal, social, professional, or political characteristics. For Tilly, organization in the cause of contention occurs when both catness and netness intersect—his example is a local printers' union. Tilly's conceptualizations have been considered in relation to Chinese (labor) activism—on how the density of informal interpersonal networks engenders trust, solidarity, and reliability in protest mobilization (Liu 2016) yet fails to translate into coordination and solidarity between different workers (Yongshun 2006, 6). In a recent study of the long-haul-trucker dispute in Russia, Crowley and Olimpieva (2016) consider the inherently limited catness of these types of Russian labor protests.

The callback to Tilly underlines my main argument—that experiential density and shared commitment in activist networks are worthy of greater attention. However, I argue that both *identity* and *network* are too container-like and ultimately static as categories. My proposal is to look at experience and practices as intersubjective phenomena—"*within* relationships and *between* persons" (Jackson 1996, 26)—to chart a course between overly subjectivist (agency-based) and objectivist (structural) accounts of activism. Essentially, this is a main task of phenomenologically inspired scholarship. As McAdam (2003, 283) notes, a network approach comes with its own blinders. Beyond structuring variables, one needs to search for mechanisms of "[cultural] *content*" (McAdam 2003, 287, original emphasis) that shape contentious politics. In other words, the dynamics of the social setting matter a lot; McAdam reflects on the limits of structuralist approaches to social movements and proposes more of a role for "agency." Geography and anthropology have recently both made important contributions to how emotion, (copresent forms of) solidarity, and creativity affect the understanding of new and hybrid forms of resistance

that are written into everyday life and that are not reducible to intentionality (e.g., Hughes 2016; Pottinger 2017).

However, emotional and affective perspectives are not enough on their own to do justice to the phenomenological approach I favor. "New" unions and labor activists are typically more loosely institutionalized and less hierarchical. They lack the permanent copresence and density of netness that institutions and traditional workplaces provide and instead are entangled in a wider web of looser affinities and contingent alliances.

The classical unity of the union may be lacking, yet activists, despite their dispersal, draw on the shared experience of political collaboration in concrete actions and overlapping and uninterrupted lines of (particularly online) communication to intensify their sense of solidarity and cause. I call this process *experiential entanglement*. Shared causes are actualized by the lived experience of activists as workers *and* activists, as well as their encounters with others and with union organizing. Entanglement in common experience (in working as a food courier, participating in a protest picket, or just hanging out in a YouTube livestream) shortens the time horizons for possible actions. By the same token, our perspective on activism moves beyond the static and sometimes content-less containers of identity and network.

Entanglement is a solution to two conceptual problems. It overcomes a subject-object division, where purposive action is delegated to the individual or the movement according to rules of hierarchy. Experience is a way for participants to share transformation via contention. As Mattingly argues (2019, 419), the "phenomenological point is not that social categories and conditions should be disregarded but that experience cannot be reduced to what they encompass or call attention to." Ways of thinking and acting in common emerge as a consequence of entangled experience. This is the phenomenological challenge to agentic intentionality or structural accounts of networks (Jackson 1996, 22; Mattingly 2019, 423).

New Unions Occupy Activist Niches in the Years 2000–2009

As mentioned above, Russia's trade union umbrella organization is the largest in Europe. Affiliates are the inheritors of former official unions, which were directly subordinated to the Communist Party. With few exceptions, they occupy a position akin to managing labor discontent by administering benefits in kind from employers. This Soviet legacy makes unions into something distant from their image of sometimes militant counterparts in liberal democracies. Instead, in the USSR, and in a much more truncated way since its dissolution,

unions bridged the gap in the incomplete welfare state under communism. Important elements of what was called the "social wage" were at least partly under the purview of unions—including things like vouchers for holiday trips. Other aspects of the social wage were subsidized food, a fast track to housing, access to kindergartens, and so on. Whether the union had a real role in provision of these or not, their image was indelibly linked to discretionary (yet important, expected, high-value) job perks.

Even before 1991, this hybrid welfare state started to break down, and in the 1990s, with social wages increasingly eroded and wage arrears becoming the major generator of labor unrest, these paternalist unions lost much of their rationale for existence and proved unable to reform themselves. While unions still promote the illusion of institutional power via intensive cooperation with the state, FNPR affiliates' associational power is inexorably eroding, with massive loss of members since 1990 and a lack of serious organizational restructuring. However, this lack of adaptation presented a major opportunity for more activist organizers.

From 1990 onward, there were serious attempts to build alternative unions, suggesting that transformation of the established and inflexible industrial relations system might be possible (Biziukov 2003; Greene and Robertson 2009). However, these attempts failed, partly because of internal conflicts and partly because of continued state support for FNPR unions. While alternative unions were able to demonstrate structural power, especially in manufacturing and transport, they failed to gain stable associational power or meaningful institutional power. Their most significant achievement was the emergence of an alternative federation in 1995, the Confederation of Russian Labor (KTR), which was able to carve out its own space legally as a more activist-focused organization and gain about two million members. Nonetheless, employment relations in Russia are still dominated by the traditional FNPR unions.

The growing significance of foreign firms in Russia in the period from 2000 to 2009 created an opportunity for alternative trade unionism (Chetvernina 2009). Like the alternative unions of the 1990s, small unions at company level grew out of conflicts not because wages were in arrears—which was still a problem in Soviet-style factories dominated by the old unions—but precisely because these multinationals sold jobs as "high-tech" and "modern" yet made deals with regional politicians to keep wages low. Unions made use of workers' strong marketplace and workplace bargaining power in the automotive industry, mobilizing large groups of workers in the production process to achieve demands relating to wages but also to working time and health and safety. Most small local unions are affiliated with the Interregional Trade Union of

Autoworkers (Mezhregional'nyi Profsoiuz Rabochaia Assotsiiatsiia [MPRA]; Olimpieva 2012).

Not surprisingly, the VW plant in Kaluga, which Sarah Hinz and I studied from 2009 to 2013, was rapidly and successfully unionized by the MPRA, shortly after the factory opened (Hinz and Morris 2017). By 2012, with twelve hundred workers organized, the union gained legal recognition from management, though membership was only around 20 percent of production operatives. Relations between management and the MPRA were tense and difficult. The German management underestimated MPRA's ability to gain access to the plant and salt the workers with at least one highly competent and experienced activist.[4] In 2012, the union entered collective bargaining (significant because of the high threshold required for recognition), and in 2013, it successfully called for strikes (ruled unlawful by a court) and protests. The novelty of this kind of labor activism lies in unconventional tactics—such as protest, political pickets of non-VW car dealerships, sabotage of production, and work-to-rule, known in Russian as the "Italian strike." The union won concessions on pay and reductions in agency labor contracts. Spurred on, their second campaign sought to reduce shift and working-week lengths. Today the union remains the key player at the plant but is less able to mobilize than before.

Before moving to discuss micro-level activism, it is worth noting a different form of entanglement: that of old and new forms of labor organization. "Old" and "new" unions should not be understood as in rigid opposition. It would be a mistake to oppose new to old in terms of active-passive, confrontational-collaborative, or institutional-devolved. MPRA mixes traditional institutionalized markers with a much looser and more flexible orientation and opportunistic approach. This translates into a corresponding model of interactions and relationships among its activists. Indeed, a notable and unanticipated aspect of new activism in MPRA is how it becomes entangled in some of the welfare activities associated with FNPR unions.

MPRA as a Case Study in Diffusion and Brokerage between Sites of Activism

Even at the time of my original fieldwork, it was apparent that local MPRA success at Kaluga was primarily due to professionalized activism with significant outside support, not only from MPRA nationally but also from anti-capitalist groups then affiliated with the Russian Socialist Movement (RSD).[5] While the main organizer in Kaluga had not previously been a professionalized activist, the involvement of others presents a classic example of what Tilly calls diffusion

of a relatively small number of frustrated leftist political activists looking for causes.[6] *Diffusion* refers not only to the migration from one cause to another but also the transfer of information along lines of interaction (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, 333).

The relatively unconventional forms of contention that took place were indications of transference, sometimes approaching a hybrid of traditional methods of labor protest and the politics of the street (including criminal damage to private property). At the same time, the MPRA case seemed to illustrate McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly's (2001) concept of brokerage—linking previously unconnected social sites. Anti-capitalist activists migrated between disparate causes—from the well-known environmental campaign to save a Moscow forest from roadbuilding, to labor activism with MPRA.[7] As Laura Henry (2006, 109) notes, changes in information technology mean that the term *organization* is increasingly plastic and that small groups or even individuals can be effective in seeding activism once transplanted from one site to another, perhaps especially so in the febrile environment of niche activism in a wider social field where action is politically constrained (102).

In the MPRA case, two visible activists were clearly supported morally, informationally, and tactically by a virtual network of others—some of whom were peripheral to the union movement. While stressing their independent journey into activism, they emphasized the intellectual influence of RSD and antifascism as a common cause among activists. MPRA nationally was materially supported by IG Metall (the powerful German autoworkers' union) and was also in touch with other international labor activists. While this environment socialized the greenhorn activists to the importance of the union as an institution, much of their personal philosophy was "workerist" or autonomist—they repeatedly conceptualized activism as "revolution from below"—and related to horizontal teaching and learning.

Despite RSD influence, they continually stressed the experiential—that witnessing and experiencing injustice in the course of working life had politicized them. When asked about initial involvement, they emphasized that consciousness developed through concrete events and experiences and that this insight required focus on day-to-day life in the plant. Here, there was an admission that even new unions had to balance conflict with a sensitivity to the concerns of traditional unions—the little things workers moan about in various places, including online. Despite years of experience in MPRA, when interviewed in 2013 they still emphasized learning from experience and then transmitting that learning—particularly through the local union's active VKontakte pages. A remarkable aspect of union work was the thriving and very open discussion

online. Many thousands of posts were made in response to member and non-member questions in this small space of activism.

The union also regularly published printed materials with wide-ranging commentary on issues at the plant but also on national and international topics such as tripartite unionism, precarious work, and political economy. These were a crucial form of subversion of official transcripts. For example, writers attacked the notion of partnership between plant and workers. The large-format double-sided newsletters were eagerly consumed by nonunion members, who felt that reading and discussing sheets of paper in private was safer than participating online. Thus, the newsletters and their consumption serve as an example of infrapolitics in action, where political socialization takes place in ways almost invisible to the wider society.

Can we translate this into an assessment of netness and catness? It both falls short and exceeds them. On the one hand, some of the nodes that we could ascribe to the dense network that facilitates MPRA's success are transitory. At best, brokerage is intermittent, and the pathways of diffusion, well, a little diffuse. There was evidence of moral encouragement, some training through mobility of activists, the use of IG Metall as an interface internationally, and sporadic local interaction with RSD. On the other hand, this slack netness creates different kinds of potentially useful contingencies and mutual obligations. In turn, over time the local nonprofessional activists developed their own hybrid set of strategies (including responding to mundane and nonpolitical demands of workers and even nonunion members).

When the Interior Ministry's anti-extremism unit arrested an activist, it was workers at the plant in his immediate vicinity who provided help—the loose catnet tightened. While catness operates both locally (among workers) and nationally (among RSD activists), it is based on shared indigenous experience. This experience is as transformative to participants' relations—entangling them in cause and loyalty to each other—as cultural (Tarrow's [1993] term), emotional, or, indeed, cognitive models of contentious mechanisms.[8] Borrowing, adaptation, and spontaneous local growth of novel organizational forms (the idiosyncratically transparent and responsive VKontakte pages) characterize this activism.

Gig Worker Organization and Activism: Reproducing Divisions between Passive and Active Unions?

The second case presented is the Moscow food-courier dispute that began in late 2019. Food couriers are a recent global manifestation of precarious labor

on city streets. They use public, private, or hired transport—from scooters to cars—to collect meals from producers and deliver to private clients. What distinguishes them from traditional delivery drivers is that they lack a formal or informal labor contract with the food producers. Sometimes this shift in how production and labor intertwine is described as part of the "sharing economy," the idea being that different food preparers make use of the same dispersed labor delivery force, which is then more productively utilized using supply and demand allocating algorithms and geolocated mobile phones.

Critical views question the term *sharing* as misleading, since many examples, including food delivery, are not really peer-to-peer economic transactions. Instead, most models like Uber result in greater rates of (often micro) capital exploitation (cars as taxis, private accommodation as mini hotels, etc.). Low wages are typical, and precarious self-employed workers are forced to sweat their assets. In the food-delivery business, the "uberization" of services has led to cutthroat competition between aggregator third parties who develop the software and own mobile application architecture, as well as to falling wages and negative socioeconomic externalities such as pollution and congestion. Former Soviet states are no exception to this trend, although sharing platforms continue to coexist with lo-fi semi-informal modes where risk is individualized, as in the infamous informal taxis (Kovács et al. 2017).

The Moscow food-delivery market is commensurate with the city's wealth, size, and large number of fast-food chains (see fig. 7.1). Demand for couriers expanded massively during the COVID-19 pandemic, and notably couriers were exempted by the Moscow government from lockdown in 2020 (Orlova and Morris 2020). There are three major players in the Moscow market: Delivery Club (the target of labor activism), Yandex Eda, and Sbermarket. Delivery Club was fulfilling one million orders a week in the middle of April 2020.

Delivery workers are highly visible because they are required to dress in the brightly colored livery of the particular platform/aggregator they are currently working for, carry branded color-coordinated cube-shaped insulated backpacks, and have to wait publicly in eateries, travel by public transport, or move about on foot, bike, or scooter. Many are visible ethnic minorities from central Asia, underlining the work's low status, precariousness, and caste-like character. This visibility partly facilitated self-organization and communication with activists migrating from other causes. However, as becomes clear, this is not a case of activists colonizing this new space of activism (and reproducing ethnic hierarchies). While demands are articulated mainly through white activists (to the media, via Telegram channels), the genealogy of the dispute and the success of rapid mobilization—which could not come without

Figure 7.1. Food-delivery couriers on bicycle in central Moscow. ~~Photography~~ taken by author in July 2021.

trust building and negotiation among couriers—shows more synergy than opportunism.[9]

Before the pandemic, labor activists in different parts of the world had tried to organize couriers because of the dangerous and unhealthy conditions they work in. Low piece-rate pay and aggregator companies' delegation of all risk to the courier by contracting out each individual job on a demand basis, denying workers employee status, make them a visible group of precarious workers. Notable cases of attempted labor organization of these so-called gig workers occurred in Canada and California among Uber drivers and in New Mexico among baristas. In some European jurisdictions, Uber has been denied a license to operate.

The 2020 Canadian Food and Commercial Workers union dispute with Uber had three aims: to force payment for all hours worked, to allow recourse to a legally binding grievance procedure, and to have contracts legally recognized, making workers employees rather than contractors. In 2018, Uber drivers won the right to be recognized as workers rather than self-employed contractors in the UK, with the case reaching the Supreme Court in 2020 on appeal. This campaign had more of the character of a legal action than of organized unionism. California's Supreme Court in August 2020 ruled that Uber and Lyft should treat drivers as employees and pay sick pay, unemployment insurance, and holiday pay. However, this was overturned in November 2020 by a statewide vote (Proposition 22) heavily funded by gig companies.

In Russia, independent unions had previously been involved in some solidarity activism with service workers in the food sector and with striking Ozon e-commerce delivery workers in October 2019 (KTR 2019). Because of the legal restrictions of the 2001 Labor Code, it is vital that legally recognized unions do not allow the authorities to accuse them of actively participating in the organization or the unionization of other professions. However, in the Ozon case, it is almost certain that activists from a KTR union did provide administrative and legal aid—KTR cloaked their involvement in the euphemistic phrase "giving support." Since 2018, taxi drivers, increasingly exasperated by the dominance of a single Uber-type app platform called Yandex-taxi, have attempted to self-organize online (via the Russian-developed, cloud-based Telegram instant messaging service) using coordinated boycotts of the Yandex app.

This effort proved a salutary reminder of the limits of slacktivism, with a significant social media presence and clearly identified and articulated grievances failing to translate into any coordinated action. In some respects, the taxi drivers' case echoes that of the Blue Buckets Society of car owners (Evans 2018). Car owners made use of a limited repertoire of complaint culture actions and a too-narrow framing of disputes. Those involved eschewed wider framing of disputes and more activist mindsets and sought apolitical or technical solutions, which often made the emerging taxi union look more like a self-help group than an association for bargaining.

By contrast, food couriers' militancy and potential for self-organization are shown by spontaneous actions in 2019. The death from a heart attack of a young Saint Petersburg courier from Kyrgyzstan drew press coverage and interest among left-leaning groups online (Petlianova 2019).[10] In Kazan, a significant unofficial strike occurred in September of that year. Coordination efforts made use of Telegram chat. In November 2019, a new Telegram channel called "SKR Russian Union of Couriers" appeared with a Moscow-based coordinator, but its activism resembled that of the taxi drivers, emphasizing self-help, information, and dialogue. It garnered around one thousand subscribers with a small sub-chat group.

Then Moscow-based group Courier Union appeared on Telegram. Its aggressive approach and politicized language had obvious links to a broad network of activists with leftist credentials. This channel clearly focused on two grievances: delays in pay for couriers working for Delivery Club and financial penalties for small infractions of rules. In June and July 2020, Courier Union threatened strikes and picketed the Delivery Club's parent company. The main organizer, Kirill Ukraintsev, successfully created a popular online space for the communication of more radical activism. He also generated enough short-term

traction among couriers that the threat of strike was taken seriously by the company and the mainstream media.

Relatively detailed, if not completely sympathetic, accounts of the dispute were covered by business sites RBC and Forbes. By taking on the role as spokesperson for the "union," Ukraintsev was able to leverage and combine online and offline resources. As of the time of writing in late August 2020, Delivery Club's parent company was promising to make good the debt to the couriers, with the activist claiming that millions of rubles of arrears and worker penalties had already been paid.

New Labor Activists Entangled in Public-Personal Networks of Shared Experience

As in the case of MPRA in Kaluga, the Courier Union example allows us to look up close at activist entanglement. Kirill Ukraintsev, the face of the Courier Union campaign, was previously visible as an emerging leftist YouTuber. It is worth noting the degree of candor and fearlessness of this new generation of activists and a new degree of social leveling,[11] at the same time as highlighting their links with the "older" generation while avoiding the trap of romanticizing technopolitics and its potential for strengthening reaction (Sierra Caballero and Gravante 2018; Weidmann and Rød 2019).

Nonetheless, the Ukraintsev case underlines that internet activism and real-world activism are difficult to separate; they reinforce each other, present a particular form of entanglement of the public and the personal, and increase connections without necessarily implying the density or intensity of netness or catness. Both are important in maintaining momentum for activists in a political environment where opportunities for real contention come and go and where the severity of authoritarian repression also varies. Ukraintsev has a history of informal association with activists from RSD, the Left Front, KTR, and MPRA. In taking up the cause of couriers, he also had some contact with an activist formerly of StopXam and Nashi, organizations associated with regime-inspired youth activism.

However, before the courier dispute, he was known exclusively as a leftist YouTuber. Notable was Ukraintsev's ability to rapidly mobilize from his wide yet loose network of comrades from different anti-capitalist shades of opinion and translate some of his online ideas into offline action. Mobility takes on another facet of significance, though: in the courier actions, meetings took place between Saint Petersburg and Moscow union activists; Saint Petersburg MPRA lent resources of various tangible and intangible kinds to the Moscow

campaign; and leafleting (typical of groups such as Socialist Tendency) took place in far-flung Nizhnii Novgorod. Ukraintsev himself is an interesting example of several hands-on new left activists who are not from Moscow and are less wedded to a strong embeddedness in one particular group.

In a number of long public online discussions and interviews, Ukraintsev talks about his politicization and activist genealogy. He is comfortable discussing the minutia of leftist ideas, but like the MPRA activists, he emphasizes practical action and experiential embeddedness as a motor of contention and a means for further political enlightenment. When asked by a fellow leftist YouTuber about how he became involved in the courier dispute, he talks about the importance of self-organization of the base, of linking this to the wider issue of gig workers, and of the tactical decision not to frame disputes as class struggle "because we know we can get a sympathetic audience among pension protestors and those against in-fill building developers" (*Sovetskoe Televidenie* 2019).

Ukraintsev is associated with other YouTube channels, one of which (*Vestnik Buri* [Stormbringer]) is probably the most popular left politics channel in Russian, with two hundred thousand subscribers and many videos on a variety of subjects. All have a consistently anti-capitalist or Marxist flavor, and a few of them garner over a million views. In the same interview, Ukraintsev talks about developing this YouTube "revolutionary propaganda channel" and discusses the vlogger team's political positioning as "the only socialist/communist players of the general oppositional field." The point of the videos is to retain a left identity without falling into liberal narratives. Left group collaboration with figures like Aleksei Navalny is not to be avoided but to be embraced to show that the Left has broad concerns and that they constitute a non-factional assembly.

Ukraintsev is currently an activist of the Left Bloc [*Levyi Blok*]—a loose affiliation of socialist groups that emphasize the right to independent action, created at the end of 2015. He has been vlogging since 2017 but has been an activist since the politicizing Bolotnaia election protests in 2011. Acknowledging that this politicization was gradual, he talks about the educating and enlightening power of exposure to various currents—including libertarian communist organizations such as Autonomous Action, Siberian anarchists, RSD, and MPRA. As a libertarian left socialist activist,[12] he talks about the reflexive need in the nonsystem left to be flexible and collaborative and for different activists to figuratively meet one another. Indeed, a livestream on YouTube about the dispute included a Q&A from the virtual public.

This new type of connectedness moves beyond the limits of union or party activism. This is entanglement in activism appearing as novel forms of transfer

and interfacing that use technology. Indeed, in one talk, Ukraintsev mentions what in his view is novel about this activism: that Telegram allowed the campaign to activate a groundswell of solidarity among *consumers* of couriers' services for the first time—a further entangling. Talking about post-2012 left activism, Ukraintsev says, "We're dealing with the shards of movements that were strong in the aftermath of Bolotnaia and which got a second wind due to labor disputes like the trucker protests."

He sees the dynamic of protest as reinvigorated by the potential of social media and vlogging. This dynamic also is linked to moving away from party affiliation and narrower electoral activism that tends to lead to rapid demobilization between elections.[13] Ukraintsev and his associates clearly tend to be less invested in a single organization, network, or cause, and this strategy appears to be partly mediated by generational positioning and the disappointment after 2011–2012. The distributed logic of digital communication is projected onto political activism, bringing with it questions about the relative strength of open "reciprocal action" (as Ukraintsev says) and of bounded networks.

The Paradox of Experiential Entanglement

In this summarizing discussion, I reflect on points of connection between the MPRA and Courier Union cases. I also develop the concept of entanglement and the role of technology that are important to the field of activism in Russia today and their relationship to some of the classic ideas about contention outlined earlier in relation to Tilly and Tarrow.

The horizontal networking between relatively diverse yet committed individuals, groups, and loose affiliations is important. Moreover, mobilization, if not fully successful in both MPRA and Courier Union cases, depends on reciprocity among activists, their long-standing yet loose social relations, which allow easy diffusion (transfer of information and personnel) and collaboration, facilitated by technology that allows them to be geographically or physically dispersed but still closely connected.

Anthropologists inspired by Actor-Network Theory have called netness a form of entanglement (Case 2011). Tilly's use of *netness* is a separate coining that emphasizes membership and density of connecting points and only indirectly indicates the importance of social embeddedness. Entanglement emphasizes that shared or lived experiences contribute to network relations and that technopolitics entails a tighter knitting together of quasi-public political identity and the personal than was possible before the internet.

Let us step back for a moment and compare the concerns of this chapter with those of others in this volume. Matti Dollbaum, Andrei Semenov, and Elena Sirotkina's chapter on the success of the Navalny 2017–2018 mobilization campaigns stressed activist experience and genealogy as factors. Seasoning in prior experiences of campaigning and the generation of informal networks sustained online in fallow periods were important. Activists gravitated toward the Navalny campaign not just because of a strong commitment to this one cause but because of diverse and cumulative grievances.

Zhelnina in this volume emphasizes processes of trust building, collaboration, and horizontal networking as a kind of experiential learning about how not to be powerless. Like Dollbaum, Semenov, and Sirotkina's chapter, these are long-term processes with origins in other grievances or moments of contention. I also wish to emphasize the focus in these chapters on the "processual" development of activist potential through both cognitive and "unconscious" experiential learning. The focus on processual insights aligns with Clément and Zhelnina's recent (2020) development of more phenomenologically inflected perspectives on how activism, pragmatic politics, and networks are mutually constituted and "grounded" in everyday experience, practices, and routines. These are not cognitive, affective, or structuralizing arguments.

While the present study is composed of a self-selecting sample of dedicated activists, their meta-reflection on the success or failure of different campaigns and approaches and on the genealogy of the Left in Russia is worthy of note. After all, it also frames activism as sensitive to the meaning of the "experiential" side. The cases give us an unusual insight into the long-term problem of a lack of coalescence among antisystem groups, long seen as a barrier to a more unified opposition (Smyth 2006; Kolstø 2016; Semenov 2017). However, despite the pragmatic rhetoric of triangulation between causes and groups, their story is really one of a post-coalescence perspective—another example of activist learning.

The 2011–2012 Bolotnaia protests are a watershed event after which these activists, more or less disillusioned with electoral politics, turn to the base, grassroots causes and to propaganda (a term they use repeatedly). This is a tendency shared by very different activists in the studies of this book. Ironically, while conditioned partly by the failure of Bolotnaia, this dynamic recalls the very origins of syndicalism in the late nineteenth century and the eternal dilemma of labor politics—what the relationship should be between socialists and, as Lenin famously put it, parliamentary cretinism.

It is not surprising that there is an elective affinity between this branch of left politics generally and a sympathy for the experiential and grounded

struggle-as-life at the core of these activists' performative identity. For them, recurring narratives act as mobilizing resources: the direct action of workers and the role of the strike—elements that Georges Sorel identified as important "myths" in producing revolutionary energy for syndicalists (Schecter 1990). What is new is the reframing of struggle from the national labor movement to the global Left's struggle. This young generation is well versed in the need for the Left to address identity politics and postcolonialism. Thus, they are keen to link traditional labor politics to novel and—for activists—sometimes esoteric theoretical ideas such as the multitude, the global precariat, and left accelerationism.

This outward-looking stance is still resolutely based on the primacy of lived experience and even self-transformation through action. Indeed, this focus on action was clearly so important to some activists that as an internalized disposition it actually threatened my ability as researcher to win their trust and connect with them. The suspicion and "vetting" that I was subject to only underlines this; a professor lacks the capacity to adequately speak with, or for, left groups because he has not entangled himself in struggle or lived injustice.[14] Here again we encounter a paradox of this mode of activism: while globally aware, activists present themselves as not embedded in a particular ideology (not even syndicalism) and *not* shaped by a common history of struggle (against Putin, for example). Their netness is loose and their catness opportunistic or even pluralistic and intersectional.

In their choice of action, connection, and articulation of grievances, they attempt to escape easy incorporation into any of the well-known or visible vehicles of opposition in Russia today—be it nationalism, the co-opted Left (systemic parties), the so-called liberal intelligentsia opposition. They would likely think of Tilly's brokerage as too static a conceptualization because it presupposes a fixity of positions, rather than their experience of a more contingent, uncertain politics. This is a version of nomadic activism that evokes the theorizing of late capitalism and the resistance to its engine, the state, by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and others. For Paolo Virno, movement and mobility—characterized as the potential for "defection"—become more important as tactics of resistance than are traditional modes of activism bundled as openly oppositional protest (2004, 76).

* * *

Combining objective and subjective accounts of actors with phenomenological perspectives strikes me as important. In the 1980s, new social movement

theories began grappling with the problem of the individual and collective action, cognition, and emotion. This resulted in a different kind of political science pioneered by Alberto Melucci (1989) that would not reduce movements to coherent groups with a structural integrity or imperative. Instead, Melucci highlighted intermediate processes between the levels of individual and of movement. In a sense, this was a parallel approach to that undertaken by Tilly in political sociology's turn toward relational and network modes of inquiry.

Both Melucci's and Tilly's approaches offer points of departure into what I have called the experiential approach to activism. Melucci (1989) writes of the importance of attending to the "submerged" reality of movements, to avoid the abstraction of "networks." Tilly (2001) writes about the "integration of cognitive, relational and environmental." Nonetheless, both Melucci and Tilly are accused of remaining culturally reductionist (Bartholomew and Mayer 1992; Brubaker 2010). In this chapter, I have argued that while shared cognitive motivation is important to networks, the experiential entanglement of activism is also worthy of consideration. This has cognitive, reflective, and also non- or precognitive significance as "lived experience." I describe the experiential side of activism as phenomenological because this emphasizes the importance of intersubjective lifeworlds inhabited by activists.[15] These lifeworlds might have reflexive surfaces in "talk," but they also have prediscursive, prerational foundations (Charlesworth 2000, 4) in the unarticulated embodiment of injustice (the experience of the weight of the courier's backpack, the long-term injuries of class from the auto assembly line), as well as in the shared experience of being in a march, picket, or contentious action.

Activism is considered the beginning of building institutionalization and scaling up movements. But what is missing is a close inquiry into the mechanisms of struggle—the "being in the world" that produces potentiality. This isn't a restatement of agency versus structure in phenomenological clothing.[16] Instead, in showing how entangled activists meet, organize, and further share experiential struggle, I wish to challenge the deterministic interpretation that favors consciousness and intentionality over transformations through social activity. This is also in contrast to encountering the world of contention only at the discursive level—the rebuke of the activist to the professor. The chasm between saying and doing is where most people falter.[17]

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Notes

1. *Structural power* refers to one of Erik Olin Wright's (2000) three typologizations of working-class power.
2. Ideally, I would have liked to do "connective ethnography" (Dirksen, Huizing, and Smit 2010), in which researchers connect online with informants as well as doing research physically at a site that includes interviews, participant observation, and other qualitative methods. However, the courier strikes are better described as examples of "virtual ethnography" as my interactions with participants took place online and my tracing of networks and actions by participants relied entirely on online sources.
3. Tilly in turn based *catness* and *netness* on his interpretation of Harrison White's work on group taxonomies to identify where group identities and networks coincide, which the latter called "catnet" (1978, 63).
4. "Salting" as a tactic introducing an activist to a plant to agitate and organize is discussed widely in professional union literature but less in academic work.

5. Interview with KTR employee Dmitrii Kozhnev from April 13, 2013, on RSD's website (Ovsiannikov and Kagarlitskii 2013). This interview details Kozhnev's activist work in Kaluga and gives an idea of the relatively compressed social networking of RSD, KTR, and anti-capitalist activists as well as their literal and political mobility.

6. I use the term *leftist* as a compromise between the common use of *ultraleftist* by the liberal Russian press to describe these activists and the terms they use to describe themselves, which vary from *anti-capitalist* to *socialist* and *communist.*

7. Cf. Tarrow's (1993) discussion of modular transferability during a cycle of contention, where he examines the process of diffusion. For another discussion, see Wada (2012).

8. McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly make the point that local relations can be contingently strong without being categorical (i.e., knitted through shared identity).

9. Ukraintsev discusses at length the processes of communication, negotiation, and mobilization in a long online stream from August 22, 2020, later published on the small *Luch* YouTube channel run by Marxist-Leninists. He mentions that the couriers couldn't wait and were a driving force of self-organization before his involvement. He also talks about the support received from a spectrum of leftist groups. The previous actions by couriers lend weight to his account. "Общение с председателем профсоюза 'Курьер,'", August 22, 2020, video, 1:40:55, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XpMnSPIUVc0&feature=youtu.be.

10. The portal vc.ru featured a call for unionization by a prolific blogger on the problems of "freelance" labor, the new digital precariat, and collective action. ("Курьерам 'Яндекс.Еды' и Delivery Club нужен профсоюз," December 19, 2019, https://vc.ru/legal/98134-kureram-yandeks-edy-i-delivery-club-nuzhen-profsoyuz.

11. Although it is beyond the scope of the chapter, it is worth highlighting the relevance to labor activism of the effect of social leveling. What I mean by this is that young people increasingly gain a higher education but experience the same precarious experience of work as those without the opportunity of extended schooling. Similarly, the emergence of YouTubers with political agendas indicates complementary leveling-up the other way, with organic intellectuals emerging from their engagement with social media and online resources for self-education.

12. In Russian it is possible to distinguish between *libertarianskii* and *libertarnyi*. In correspondence with me, Ukraintsev requested to clearly distinguish between the former, a non-socialist form of liberalism, and the latter, which can collocate with *socialist*. Online correspondence, December 1, 2020.

13. For a discussion of the view that the failed attempt to create a visible party sufficiently to the left of the Russian Communist Party has "debilitated" leftist politics despite the Left's "potentiality," see Luke March (2017).

14. A draft of this chapter was shared with Ukraintsev, who made some corrections to biographical and ideological details.

15. The term *lifeworld* (after Schütz and the phenomenological tradition more generally) emphasizes the domain of the everyday, immediate social experience and practical activity. See Jackson (1996).

16. James Jasper's work has emphasized the cultural context of social movements and individual agency, as well as emotion (see Jasper 2004, 2007, 2018, respectively). My approach is grounded in phenomenological anthropology, which has points of contact with such cultural turns in social movement research but remains highly suspicious of unqualified terms such as *culture*, *subjectivity*, and *identity* as points of entry into explaining social phenomena.

17. I owe this insight to an informal discussion in spring 2020 started by Gregory Afinogenov on Trump-era activism in the United States.