Who Has the Right to the Coworking Space? Reframing Platformed Workspaces as Elite Territory in the Geomedia City

Karin Fast

Abstract
Current research suggests that coworking spaces (CWS) both respond to and legitimize work precarization. This is an important critique. Less acknowledged, however, is the fact that CWS also (re)produce eliteness. Thus, to the aim of offering perspectives that remain underrepresented in CWS research, I here scrutinize CWS as promotors of class privilege. I build my case on the premise that class privilege has to do with more than merely economic superiority and seek to dismantle, in particular, the role of geomedia technologies in the (re)production of CWS eliteness. With clues derived from a literature review as well as analyses of real-life cases, I here recognize CWS as places of elite (non-)consumption, as hubs of elite mobility, as nodes in elite networks, and, ultimately, as elite territories in the (super-)gentrified geomedia city. I end my article by reflecting on the dialectics of CWS eliteness, thereby suggesting how precariousness and eliteness are interlinked.

Keywords
coworking space, elite, geomedia, gentrification, social stratification

Introduction
Recent research on so-called coworking spaces (CWS) has raised the question of how these “predominantly white, male and middle-class places of work” (Lorne, 2019, p. 3) play into existing power relations. Nonetheless, the socially stratified and stratifying nature of these shared, curated workplaces remains largely un-researched, as does the relationship between CWS and “wider urban transformation processes” (Brown, 2017, p. 113). In this article, I, therefore, ask: who has the “right” to the CWS and—in continuation of this—to “the city” (cf. Lefebvre, 1968/1996). Recognizing CWS as a signature of platform urbanism (Barns, 2020; Sadowski, 2020), I aim to dismantle the role of CWS in media-induced processes of social stratification and urban gentrification. I will argue that digital media—including place-aware geomedia (McQuire, 2016; Thielmann, 2010)—contribute to the (re)production of sociospatial inequality by facilitating such processes. Ultimately, I hope to contribute to CWS research and
adjacent fields of study by foregrounding the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that cause CWS to arise as elite territories in the geomedia city. Following Hartmann and Jansson (this issue), I here understand “the geomedia city” as “a city whose life forms and modes of (re)production are in various ways reliant on and embedding geomedia.” By focusing the role of (geo)media technology in the making of privilege, my article also responds to research calls made in the field of elite studies (cf. Birtchnell et al., 2013). My approach here is chiefly theoretical and departs from a literature review of CWS research, yet I also bring current real-life examples into my analysis.

Admittedly, I am not the first to inquire into the relationship between CWS—and the associated workstyle of “coworking”—and sociospatial inequality. Critical researchers have identified CWS as legitimizers of both work precarization and austerity urbanism, thereby challenging the CWS business’ promises to solve the problems of neoliberalized work and urbanism (Avdikos & Kalogeresis, 2017; de Peuter et al., 2017; Gandini, 2015; Jakonen et al., 2017; Jamal, 2018; Jiménez & Zheng, 2021; Lorne, 2019; Merkel, 2019; Tintiangko & Soriano, 2020). More specifically, the global success of the CWS business has been linked to the 2008 financial crisis (Merkel, 2015) as well as to tech-utopian gentrification projects spurred by “creative city” ideals (Gandini, 2015; Gandini & Cossu, 2019; Luo & Chan, 2020) and the subsequent romanticization and exploitation of the “creative precariat” (de Peuter, 2014; cf. Standing, 2011). Coworking, in such an empirical context, arguably appears mainly as a “coping” (Merkel, 2015, p. 135, emphasis added) or “survival” (de Peuter et al., 2017, p. 698) strategy for dealing with volatile life conditions.

Business statistics largely prove this picture correct: self-employed freelancers, early stage entrepreneurs, and other workers in precarious employments continue to make up the lion’s share of CWS demographics (Deskmag, 2019; DropDesk, 2021). However, the last years have seen an increased diversification of the CWS market (Fiorentino, 2019; Waters-Lynch & Potts, 2017). Today, CWS exist on a stretched-out “movement-industry continuum” (Fast & Jansson, 2019), ranging from small-scale, non-profit initiatives aimed at self-employed artists or social entrepreneurs, to multinational conglomerates (e.g., Regus, WeWork) targeting employed, white-collar professionals as well as big corporations looking for “flexible” office space. As this article will demonstrate, we also see the growth of a still severely understudied segment of self-proclaimed “premium,” “luxury,” or “elite” CWS, (re)producing and demanding of their customers a distinct—privileged rather than deprived—habitus. Although, as indicated, research data are still scarce on this particular CWS segment, cases employed in this article suggest that we are most likely to encounter such brands in super-gentrified urban neighborhoods where (aspirational) mobile elites dwell.

The multifaceted character of the CWS market makes it just as difficult to embrace it as the emancipatory, anti-neoliberal, force that stakeholders claim it to be, as it is to dismiss it as nothing but a machine for the cynical exploitation of vulnerable workers, as critics would have it. It is also this “ambivalence” (de Peuter et al., 2017) that urges me, in this article, to move beyond dominant research narratives. Although the precarization narrative is indeed both valid and important, it does not tell the whole story. The point that I wish to make here is this: while many CWS workers undoubtedly do suffer from inhumane neoliberal work ethics and while CWS can be a safe haven for precarious workers (cf. Merkel, 2015), CWS can also buttress eliteness and colonize urban space. Against this backdrop, rather than moving entirely away from dominant conceptualizations of CWS, I wish in the end to inspire a discussion about the interplay of precariousness and eliteness in the geomedia city. In so doing, I hope to strengthen the connection between CWS research and the longer trajectory of critical thought that exposes how deprivation and privilege may entwine (cf. Baumann, 2001; Berlant, 2011; Massey, 1999; Sennett, 2007).

Tokens of “CWS eliteness” appear here and there in existing research, and throughout this article, I will acknowledge studies that provide insights into the excluding mechanisms of CWS.
However, only with few exceptions does the literature acknowledge that CWS cater to an “elite class of workers” (Tintiangko & Soriano, 2020, p. 78). Mainly, CWS literature interested in class seems to operate by a negative understanding of CWS eliteness as they leave us with the conclusion that coworking is an “out-of-reach luxury” (de Peuter et al., 2017, p. 694) or “cost-prohibitive” (Grazian, 2019, n.p.) for most precarious workers. In an attempt to bridge this gap, and with significant clues derived from theory concerned with sociospatial inequality, I here approach CWS as places of elite (non-)consumption, as hubs of elite mobility, as nodes in elite networks, and, ultimately, as elite territories in the geomedia city. Before embarking on this exposé, however, I will explain the methodological choices and theoretical conceptualizations that inform my analysis.

Methodological Note and Analytical Framework

The interdisciplinary literature review underpinning this article was carried out by the author in 2020 and followed up in 2021. The review started with an inclusive search for CWS research on Google Scholar and advanced through more elaborated search strings. Given my interest here in (geo-)media-induced processes of social stratification and gentrification, the review took particular interest in studies indicating (a) the sociospatial impact of CWS and coworking on urban space and (b) the role of digital CWS technology in the (re)production of sociospatial inequality. Ultimately, 52 peer-reviewed articles were selected for closer scrutiny. To the extent that the literature guided me to relevant books and chapters on the topic, these were also taken into consideration. Except for a lack of studies on CWS eliteness, the literature review revealed two noteworthy circumstances, namely that: (a) the research field “suffers” from an ethnological bias at the expense of studies deconstructing the “semiotic landscape” of coworking (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2012) and (b) the role of (geo)media technologies in the world of CWS is implicitly acknowledged mainly to the extent that the literature dwells on themes such as CWS “community” or “networks.” Below, I will explain why both symbolic and technological elements deserve our attention if we want to understand the stratifying powers of CWS.

In addition to previous research from the field of study, the arguments put forward in this article are supported by a netnographic pilot study (Fast & Jansson, 2019) that was undertaken by the author in 2018 as part of the preparations for Hot Desks in Cool Places: Coworking Spaces as Post-Digital Industry and Movement, a 4-year ethnographical research project aiming to inquire how the current expansion of CWS contributes to the (re)production of social and spatial power relations in the “postdigital” society. Moreover, my article draws on recently conducted (2021) discursive and semiotic analyses of (geo)mediated place-images produced by CWS, notably official social media, website, and app content; the results of which will also feed into the project mentioned above. Although such representations say nothing about how CWS are experienced by people or who the CWS customers really are, their material impact has been theoretically and empirically recognized (e.g., Jansson, 2005; Lefebvre, 1991; Thurlow & Jaworski, 2006). Notably, “By shaping the image of the place they depict, such representations partake in the construction of place and define who belongs” (Bronsvoort & Uitermark, 2020, p. 2). Hence, what place-images of CWS do is to communicate who has the “right” to the CWS. It is my hope that my approach to CWS can inspire further empirical research on CWS and (geo)media-induced sociospatial inequality.

In line with existing conceptualizations, I argue that elites are drivers of sociospatial inequality (Abbink & Salverda, 2012; Baumann, 2001; Birthnell & Calatrito, 2013; Butler & Lees, 2006; Elliot & Urry, 2010; Lees, 2003; Savage & Williams, 2008). I understand “elites” here as “those who occupy the most powerful positions in structures of domination” (Scott, 2008, p. 33), yet draw on literature that locates eliteness at the intersection of “economic advantage and symbolic maneuvering” (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2017a, p. 539). Such literature
recognizes that class privilege stems not *only* from unequal distribution of material resources but also becomes (re)produced through language, imagery, and consumer goods (cf. Lash & Urry, 1994). Acknowledging the symbolic dimensions of elite formation, Thurlow and Jaworski (2013) identify *elitism* as “an aspirational ideal in relation to which all consumer-citizens, regardless of their wealth or power, are constantly persuaded and taught to position themselves” (p. 177). The fact that the ideals of the “super-rich” thus translate, via discourse, into *lifestyle desires* among the “not-so-rich” suggests that eliteness is not reserved for the wealthy (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2017b).

These and similar approaches to elites, eliteness, and elitism align with classical sociological theory on social stratification and distinction (Bourdieu, 1984, 1991; Veblen, 1899/1994) and have informed my selection of real-life cases for this article. More concretely, such theory has inspired me to select and present diverse and *contrasting* examples of CWS eliteness, ranging from self-proclaimed “elite,” “premium,” or “luxury” brands that conspicuously display high-end goods or services, to less posh but possibly “hipper” trademarks that—just as proudly—display interiors made up by cheap recycled furniture. As a consequence of this, I have ended up with cases that exist in diverse urban contexts (beyond and within the Global North). Notably, the contexts diverge in terms of gentrification status.

*Gentrification* has been conceptualized as a “middle-class colonization of the city” (Watt, 2008; cf. Atkinson & Bridge, 2005) or a generalized urban strategy of spatial regeneration implying that deprived fractions of the population—typically the (non-white) working classes—become displaced by a growing (white) middle class (Smith, 2002). The term *super-gentrification* was introduced to refer to the replacement of well-off populations by even wealthier populations; a process that we normally see in metropolitan centers (Butler & Lees, 2006; Lees, 2003). Like class theory of the kind exemplified above, contemporary gentrification literature recognizes both material and symbolic dimensions of sociospatial inequality. As such, gentrification has been linked to both aesthetic stylization (Jager, 1986; Trinch & Snajdr, 2017) and “high-status cultural consumption” (Zukin, 1987, p. 144). Recent studies also testify to the significance of *digital media*, including social media, in processes of urban classification (Bronsvoort & Uitermark, 2020; Zukin et al., 2015). With regard to the role of *geomedia* in such processes; that is, of digital technologies that “register and respond to user location” (Fast et al., 2019, p. 89; see also McQuire, 2016; Thielmann, 2010), Jansson (2019) leaves us with valuable clues. In a study of alternative tourism apps, he finds that geomedia reinforce gentrification not only through their “representational” affordances, which contribute to the classification of places as desirable, but also through their “logistical” and “connective” affordances; that is, by directing users toward these desirable places and by connecting privileged individuals and milieus with one another. As I shall argue, each of the three mentioned affordances of geomedia is vital for the production of CWS eliteness.

To advance our understanding of how eliteness may arise across the niched CWS market, it is helpful to begin our exposé by approaching CWS as stylized *places of elite (non-)consumption*.

**CWS as Places of Elite (Non-)Consumption**

CWS are not only places of production, where work is done. They are also sites of *consumption*, where tastes and distastes are displayed and acquired. More than a century ago, Thorstein Veblen (1899/1994) recognized that *conspicuous consumption* of luxurious consumer goods served as a tool of distinction for the bourgeoisie vis-à-vis the poorer classes. However, status consumption has always been “messy” (Caldwell & Henry, 2020, p. 551), and contemporary sociology has directed increased interest toward *inconspicuous consumption* as well as *conspicuous non-consumption*. While not interchangeable, both concepts have been used to refer the consumption of goods and services that may be affordable but nonetheless are valorized within a smaller,
exclusive community (Currid-Halkett et al., 2019). Importantly, conspicuous non-consumption does not necessarily imply that no consumption takes place; oftentimes, rather, consumer attention is simply shifted from one category of consumer goods or services (e.g., newly produced clothes) to another (e.g., secondhand garments) (Sørensen & Hjalager, 2020). As also demonstrated by Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1991) cultural goods, and knowledge about such goods, play a significant role in the formation of class identity. Inequality, Bourdieu argued, must, therefore, be assessed not only in terms of the unequal distribution of economic capital (i.e., financial resources) but also with regard to volumes of cultural capital (i.e., education and embodied knowledge) and social capital (i.e., access to respected social networks).

Most CWS operate by memberships which, as Richardson (2017) critically remarks, aim to secure “the right ‘sort’ of working space” (p. 306). Commonly, a CWS offers several membership options, ranging from more expensive, “all-inclusive” or “premium” memberships to more affordable “hot-desking” dittos (Jamal, 2018). If the former kind normally grants customers access to a dedicated desk or even private office, the latter invites the customer to temporarily work at a desk side by side with other “coworkers.” Apart from a workplace, memberships usually include (more or less complete) access to other CWS amenities, such as, coffee machines, gyms, studios, Wi-Fi, printers, IT support, and networking spaces. In her ethnographic study of Impact Hub Westminster in London, Lorne (2019) testifies to mechanisms of exclusiveness that may exist beyond the CWS fee, such as discrete outdoor signage, swipe cards, security doors, online registration, and obligatory declaration of “social and environmental mission” for acceptance (pp. 8–9). As indicated by the last element, customers may have to go through a selection process before gaining membership (see also van Dijk, 2019).

As the CWS business has diversified, we have also begun to see the emergence of CWS whose eliteness is partly “talked into existence” (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2009, p. 196) by way of brand name or other linguistic tactics. Bulgarian Networking Premium is one such CWS, whose offerings include “an in-house chef,” “electric scooters,” “a grand piano,” “roof-top yoga,” “napping pods,” “bike storage,” and “winetasting and cocktails” (Networking Premium, 2020a). Another is Swedish CWS No18, which runs offices in Stockholm, Atlanta, Gent, and Singapore. No18’s two Stockholm venues are located in the prestigious, super-gentrified business and entertainment district around Stureplan and at the central station. The company presents itself as a “cosmopolitan member’s club for businesses” (No18, 2021) and customers are promised a “premium experience” through, for example, on-site “health clubs,” “rejuvenating treatments,” “unique and eclectic aesthetics,” and “complimentary” Monday breakfasts (No18, 2021). No18’s official Instagram account shows off, among other things, the self-branded “Sicilian” olive oil “18,” an “antique pool table,” oyster lunches, and a social lounge gathering called the “Louis Bouillot event” (after the Champagne brand). Many of the amenities and offerings promoted on the web and in social media are framed as tools for self-optimization. For instance, No18’s “state-of-the-art-gym” is marketed as a place where “go-getters” can “achieve a personal best,” “get the blood pumping and the ideas flowing” (Instagram, 2019-11-07).

We will have reason to return to No18 later as we continue our exposé of CWS eliteness. Suffice it to conclude for now that places like Networking Premium and No18 are illustrative of the kind of extravagantly stylized CWS that have surfaced over the last years. We could perhaps refer to this segment as overtly elite CWS. However, not all CWS refer to themselves as “premium” or “elite,” and far from all offer rooftop yoga, health clubs, and Champagne events. Another, larger, category of CWS—one which we might label subtly elite CWS—establishes exclusivity in less obvious ways. To find eliteness in this type of places, we need to acknowledge other emergent sources of social distinction in the “messy” world of status consumption—such as busyness, flexibility, and authenticity. “Busyness” means time spent working has become more prestigious than time spent on leisure activities (Gershuny, 2005). Although some suggest that society as a whole accelerates (Rosa, 2003), empirical studies reveal that time pressure is
chiefly experienced by highly educated elites in dual career households (Sullivan & Gershuny, 2018). It is this linkage between busyness and privilege that makes busyness a marker of status and a sign of a “worthy, productive self” (Shir-Wise, 2019, p. 1670). Relatedly, “flexibility,” or the ability to adjust to new situations, is not only a demand placed on today’s informalized workers, but increasingly also a marker of eliteness (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020; Ledin & Machin, 2017; Roderick, 2016).

Commonly accessible 24/7 and designed according to open, “flexible” office ideals (Pajević, 2021; Richardson, 2021), CWS (re)produce busy and flexible worker subjectivities by way of place-making. Such workplace geographies help establish CWS as high-performance workplaces for aspiring, hard-working individuals, as does the semiotic landscape of many CWS. As also pointed out by Sørensen and Hjalager (2020), digital media play a significant role in “the amplification of visibility and conspicuousness” (p. 228). Thus, to speak with Jansson (2019), CWS eliteness derived from consumption relies essentially on the representational affordances of (geo)media. Indicatively, trend-setting CWS conglomerate WeWork’s Instagram account offers a stream of “friendly reminders” to harried coworkers, such as “A friendly reminder to take your lunch break if you haven’t already,” “Reminder: Give yourself time,” and “Remember to breathe.”

Eckhardt and Bardhi (2020) explain the logic of inconspicuous consumption by referencing urban hipsters’ passion for things that signal authenticity—be it “the cheapest brand of beer, the kitschiest brand of food” (p. 95). Relatedly, C. J. Thompson and Kumar (2020) recognize that inconspicuous consumption can produce “an aura of ordinariness and accessibility to reflexive elites’ consumption repertoire” (p. 650). Against this backdrop, we should not be surprised to find—at the opposite end of the scale from Networking Premium and No18 and typically in early gentrifying neighborhoods rather than (super-)gentrified dittos—CWS that proudly market their venues as anything but “premium.”

One such place is Kolgruvan, a CWS located in a slowly gentrifying area called Ringön, in Gothenburg, Sweden. As of 2019, the CWS allegedly housed 30 photographers, programmers, authors, constructors, food bloggers, and designers (Kolgruvan’s Instagram, 2019-01-24). On their main website, Kolgruvan presents itself as “a unique industrial environment that once was a chocolate factory” and declares its stance against today’s wasteful consumer society: “Products should be recycled or reused” (Kolgruvan, 2021). In alignment with this sentiment, Kolgruvan’s Instagram (https://www.instagram.com/kolgruvan/) contains images of, for example, 40 Italian chairs that were “found” “across the street for no money at all” (2017-03-22), a glass porch retrieved from “Fredrik’s parents” transformed into an office (2016-11-14), a bus stop from “Volvo’s Torslanda plant” that had been reconfigured into a “glass wall” (2017-03-07), and eight vintage chairs by the famous (and exclusive) Swedish designer Bruno Mathson (2017-02-17). Following Sørensen and Hjalager (2020), who recognize “recycling,” “upcycling,” and “repurposing,” as well as manifestations of “anti-consumerism” more broadly, as tokens of political superiority, it is reasonable to suggest that places like Kolgruvan operate by their own sort of “trusted” membership when representing the type of CWS “substance” (cf. Richardson, 2017, p. 306) that they, and possibly their preferred customers, desire. Thus, rather than premised on economic resources, this kind of eliteness is enacted via the articulation of cultural capital.

**CWS as Hubs of Elite Mobility**

Viewed through the lens of precariousness, CWS undoubtedly appear as temporal asylums for the up-rooted victims of neoliberalized work and austerity urbanism (cf. Neilson & Rossiter, 2005; Peck, 2012). Viewed through the lens of eliteness, however, this new segment of workplaces surface—as also—as promoters of elite mobility, akin to luxury tourism. Viewed as such, CWS arise not so much as sanctuaries for the deprived, but as lifestyle resorts for the “transnational” (Savage & Williams, 2008; Sklair, 2000) or “global elite” classes (Rofe, 2003), consisting
of business travelers and other “frequent-flyers.” Following Cresswell (e.g., Cresswell, 2006, 2010), mobility is here understood as an assemblage of physical movement, representation, and human practices. Such an understanding recognizes that physical movement is nothing but the “raw material” of mobility, and that the meaning—and distinction-making power—of such movement stems from discursive and social activity (Cresswell, 2010, p. 19).

Class theory acknowledges that certain people are better not only at coping with liquid conditions, but also at extracting value from such conditions (Caldwell & Henry, 2020, p. 547; Parsons & Cappellini, 2020; cf. Baumann, 2001). Actual and potential spatial mobility has been recognized as a form of capital (“motility”) that can be exchanged for other types of capital, notably economic (Kaufmann et al., 2004). The fact that mobility is “inextricably tied up with power” (Birtchnell & Caletrío, 2013, p. 6) means that it—like consumption at large—serves as a means of distinction. More specifically, mobility is emblematic of elite lifestyles (Baumann, 2001; Elliot & Urry, 2010; Fast & Lindell, 2016; Jansson, 2016a, 2018; Lash & Urry, 1994; Polson, 2016). Not only do elites have the monetary resources to travel more excessively than others; they are also the model users of the global mobility systems (Birtchnell & Caletrío, 2013) that secure the production of monetary and symbolic capital. Such systems comprise means of transport and technological infrastructures (i.e., 5G), as well as semiotics. Airport magazines, hotels, tourist resorts, and other mobility stakeholders frame mobility as part of “desirable life” (Elliot, 2013, pp. 34–35).

Arguably, CWS represent a new actor in today’s global mobility systems, producing its own version of mobility phantasmagoria. As the CWS literature also finds, they typically cluster around public transport facilities, and are keen to stress their mobility “hub” status when communicating with presumptive customers. Having studied CWS in Barcelona, Coll-Martínez and Méndez-Ortega (2019) find “a positive and statistically significant” (p. 10) correlation between the number of CWS and transport amenities (cf. Di Marino & Lapintie, 2017). Multinational company Regus’s CWS in Malmö, Sweden, may serve to illustrate the conspicuous communication of location that many CWS practice. Stressing how easily one can arrive at and leave the place, the company announces that

You couldn’t be better connected than at Hyllie Stationstorg 31. You’re only 5km from the city centre and 50 metres from the Malmö Hyllie Train and Bus Station, which can take you to Malmö city centre in seven minutes or to Copenhagen Airport in 12 minutes. (Regus, 2020)

Relatedly, Networking Premium caters for frictionless mobility for “digital nomads” (cf. Orel, 2019) by offering customers a “Nomads Pack,” consisting of “the most usable perks to allow for a ‘soft landing’” (Networking Premium, 2020b). For 99€ per month, customers get a local SIM card, airport taxi, money exchange, express on-boarding, and accommodation offerings.

As if to further smoothen coworking mobility, hundreds of CWS exploit the logistical affordances of ge@media technologies (Jansson, 2019) and market their venues via intermediary, location-contingent platforms similar to Airbnb. Croissant represents one such intermediary, whose website and smartphone app help workers to find “workplaces on the go,” “check in,” and “plug in” (Getcroissant, 2020). Paying customers get a “pass” that grants them access to “thousands of seats” across the globe. Similarly, Coworker, another major CWS intermediary, offers customers “exclusive access to every Global Pass space in over 108 countries and 500+ cities worldwide” (Coworker, 2020). Upon arrival to a “Global Pass Space,” customers are to “check in” via the Coworker app to access Wi-Fi and other coworking amenities.

Posh No18 is among the CWS which promote their facilities via Coworker. However, the company also establishes its mobility hub status in other ways. Per its branded app, No18 offers customers access to platformized micro-mobility in the shape of rentable or “shareable” electric scooters (“Grab your scooter in the reception and head out to explore Stockholm!”). Furthermore,
the company has, on several occasions, partnered up with the Swedish airline company SAS. In 2017, No18 granted the “gold bonus members” of the airline company access to their Stureplan CWS, where “SAS most frequent travelers can relax with a coffee, wait for a taxi to the airport, and have meetings with customers” (Scandinavian Traveler, 2017).

Per mobility promoting arrangements like these—or what Jansson (2016b) has called “flow architectures” (p. 430)—CWS contribute the construction of spatial flexibility as a desirable way of life. Now, we should keep in mind both that a drifting lifestyle can reflect “downwardly-mobile workers in a neoliberal economy” (B. Y. Thompson, 2019, p. 30) and that kinetic elites too, being far away from loved ones, can suffer from today’s mobility imperative (Fast & Lindell, 2016). However, CWS—like tourist destinations—must (also) be recognized as places to which privileged individuals travel-by-choice (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2010, p. 5). This does not necessarily mean that all CWS-workers travel mainly for pleasure. Most of them, however, are likely to find business traveling “relatively pleasurable”, compared to, for example, the “travel” of refugees or exploited guest-workers (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2010, p. 5). We also know that the adventurous habitus reflected in contemporary CWS discourse is more likely to be inhabited by “higher class youth,” marked by a “greater confidence in dealing with challenge and uncertain conditions” (Caldwell & Henry, 2020, p. 552). Indeed, as resorts for adventurous “back-packers” with the right kind of “passport”—and habitus—CWS do share many traits with tourist destinations.

**CWS as Nodes in Elite Networks**

As much as mobility *per se* has been identified as a source of power, so have the *social networks* that mobility tends to stimulate. And indeed, CWS construct themselves not merely as hubs in today’s global mobility systems but also as nodes in a global social network. In this section, I will argue that (geo)media technologies are integral to this social network, or what we might call the global coworkingscape (cf. Balakrishnan et al., 2016). This is to say that, if the representational affordances of (geo)media are key to the stylizing or semioticization of coworking and if the logistical affordances of (geo)media may guide coworkers to new workplaces and people, the *connective* affordances of geodata are what (supposedly) hold the hybrid coworkingscape together (Jansson, 2019). Connectivity, in short, is meant to establish the “co” in “coworking.” As I will also argue: to the extent that CWS serve as a source and generator of network capital (Urry, 2003), and granted that such capital corresponds with and may convert into power (Elliot & Urry, 2010), we need to (also) recognize CWS as nodes in a global *elite* network, or, to speak with Rofe (2003), a geographically stretched-out “global elite community.”

Urry (2003) introduced the concept of network capital to indicate how power is linked not only to mobility but also to communicational resources. As such, the term corresponds to Bourdieu’s notion of social capital, with Granovetter’s (1973) “strong-ties/weak ties” thesis, and with Wittel’s (2001) concept of “network sociality.” The latter addresses the value of media and computational literacy. Urry (2012) defines network capital as: “the capacity to engender and sustain social relations with those people who are not necessarily proximate and which generates emotional, financial and practical benefit” (Urry, 2012, p. 27). It comprises eight different elements, including, for example, “appropriate documents,” “movement capacities,” “communication devices,” “information and contact points,” and “secure meeting places” (Urry, 2012, p. 27). As we have seen, many of these resources—such as “appropriate documents” in the form of a CWS “passport,” “movement capabilities” in the shape of transport proximity and micro-mobility tools, and “information and contact points” in the form of apps and social events—are readily stressed by the CWS business as key to the coworking workstyle. Although literature on the stratifying character of CWS networks is still scarce, previous research does acknowledge CWS as networked organizations. For example, de Peuter and colleagues (2017) argue that CWS “stage” network sociality, via, for instance, curating “community hosts,” workshops, and
open-office landscapes. The idea behind such staging is to facilitate “serendipitous” encounters between people (Brown, 2017; Jakonen et al., 2017). This idea, in turn, is—as de Peuter et al. (2017) also remark—sparked by the neoliberal ideology of *entrepreneurialism*, which chiefly promotes productive, purposeful and, in the end, financially rewarding encounters (cf. Butcher, 2018). Although empirical research reveals that CWS may *fail* to live up to their promises of sociality (Jiménez & Zheng, 2021; Tintiangko & Soriano, 2020), my interest here remains with the *assumed* role of digital (geo)media as technologies of the *entrepreneurial self*.

Like other agents in the sharing or platform economy, CWS exploit the convergence of analog and digital spaces to cultivate community and entrepreneurial networking (Richardson, 2015, 2017). Writes de Peuter and colleagues (2017): “while coworking spaces prioritize face-to-face interaction between members, digital technologies are poised to be layered into the dynamics of network sociality” (p. 698). Thus, as much as CWS wish to *reterritorialize* spatially unfixed work by offering a new type of physical workplace (Merkel, 2015), social (geo)media are utilized to create (a sense of) a *detrerritorialized* CWS community. As previously indicated, CWS of some scope tend to offer brand-specific community fora, accessible via a website or app; a development that reflects a general “platformization of work” (Richardson, 2021). As of September Google Play contained 242 designated coworking apps whereas Apple’s *App Store* featured 192 dittos.

Multinational CWS *Spaces* promises that “Making new connections is as simple as plugging in” (Spaces, 2020a). On their webpage, the CWS firm explains how their branded app may facilitate networking and bring “a full calendar” of “engaging” meetings:

> Start up a conversation while you wait for your coffee or introduce yourself over lunch, and you may just find a partner for your next big venture. Or download the Spaces app to help you find a member or book a room for your meeting... Add an international network of mobile workspaces and a full calendar of business events, speakers and networking lunches, and you’ll see just how hard Spaces works to keep you engaged. (Spaces, 2020b)

Another example of platformed coworking is *The GoWork App*, which is tied to one of Indonesia’s biggest CWS firms, *GoWork*. As of 2021, *GoWork* was connected to other platform companies, including *Google* and *Amazon*, via members-only perks and benefits. Selling itself as a “premium” CWS, the company provides an app that “helps you to connect with our community of creators, entrepreneurs, and business leaders” (GoWork, 2021). Via the social geomedia app, users can find and book “the nearest *GoWork* locations,” connect and chat with members and partners, coordinate team work activities (GoWork, 2021), and more.

Hence, the networked Wittel (2001)—or should we say “platformed” (van Dijck, 2013, p. 5)—sociality of coworking is not merely skewed toward “busy” and “flexible” habitus, but also toward today’s “entrepreneurial heroes” (Birchnell & Caletério, 2013, p. 1; cf. Harvey, 1989; Szeman, 2015). Enacted in the presented examples is a form of “egalitarian elitism,” or what Jaworski and Thurlow (2009) describe as a “linguistic maneuver” by which high-status individuals reach out to subordinate groups (p. 206). While connecting to others may be staged as an action “as simple as plugging in,” *net-working*, is, as Urry (2012) remarks, hard work. As much as such activity may generate capital, it also *requires* certain amounts of “network power” (Elliot & Urry, 2010). In times when work is subjected to platformization, such power is bound to be intrinsically linked to the mastery of digital technologies.

**Concluding Remarks: CWS as Elite Territory in the Geomedia City**

In this article, I have aimed to advance CWS research and at the same time problematize the typical post-class claims of inclusiveness in the CWS industry, by viewing this category of
workplaces through the lens of *eliteness* instead of precariousness. Doing so, I have challenged the viewpoint that “To join a CWS has low entry barriers” (Capdevila, 2013, p. 6). While acknowledging the diversity of the business, I have endeavored to identify the barriers that do exist and which ultimately contribute to the construction of CWS as workplaces for a *spatial elite*. To say that it is easy to join a CWS is to disregard the economic, symbolic, and technological resources that coworking demands. Indeed, as remarked by Hartmann and Jansson (this issue), “not everyone is in the position of making use of the new flexible mobility services on offer in the geomedia city.” In this concluding section, I will bring together insights from my exposé of CWS as promoters of elite (non-)consumption, elite mobility, and elite networks, and imagine CWS as *elite territory* in the (super-)gentrifying geomedia city. I will end my reflection by suggesting how precariousness may be constitutive of CWS eliteness.

Territory is “bounded space” that excludes those “who are perceived to not belong” (Cowen & Gilbert, 2008, p. 16). Although much globalization theory has exaggerated the de-territorializing powers of networks, territory should not necessarily be seen as the opposite of network, but as its *result* (Painter, 2010). Thus, however, metaphysical or dis-embedded the CWS business claims coworking to be, we need to recognize CWS as powerful urban agents which, like other agents of gentrification, *claim urban space*. Although CWS exist in all continents—in smaller cities (Jamal, 2018) as well as in rural and suburban areas (Gandini & Cossu, 2019)—they are still largely concentrated to “global cities,” such as New York, London, Paris, Shanghai, or Melbourne (Wang & Loo, 2017). Within such cities, as my examples also indicate, CWS are commonly located in reinvented buildings in commercially vivid areas or in neighborhoods where “creative workers” dwell (Merkel, 2015, p. 133; Grazian, 2019, n.p.; Waters-Lynch & Potts, 2017). Following a general pattern of industry clustering in “creative cities” (cf. Banks et al., 2000), CWS form collaborative microclusters of entrepreneurs, consultants, freelancers, and so on, which, in turn, connect with larger clusters of interconnected organizations (Capdevila, 2013).

Provided that CWS represent the “Airbnb for work,” it is hardly surprising to find that the tech-induced coworkingscape encompasses other signature players of platform urbanism. As we have seen, CWS featuring in this article network with, for example, e-scooter firms as well as tech-giants *Google* and *Amazon*. We can add that *Spaces* recently partnered up with platform companies *Uber* and *JobStream*. Thus, CWS enter into strategic alliances to form part of the powerful “platform ecosystems” (Barns, 2020) that to a great extent (yet not exclusively) shape the geomedia city. Agents within these ecosystems claim territorial ownership not only by renting or purchasing real-estate property and land, but also by hosting particular kinds of “daytime and worktime populations” (Clark, 2005, p. 25). *To the extent that CWS*—by way of sensibly communicated (dis)tastes, mobility services, and platformed sociality—*succeed to attract the mobile, busy, flexible, and entrepreneurial “heroes”* of our time, CWS become home not only for the deprived and precarious, but also for today’s “*spatial experts*” (Jansson, 2019, p. 175). Such experts hold advantageous positions in social space and enjoy superiority in the struggle for urban space, partly due to their mastery of volatile conditions via technology. As a capital rich subject knowing how to decode carefully calibrated place-imagery as well as how to exploit the connective and logistical affordances of (geo)media, the ideal CWS-worker (as appearing in the empirical data of this paper) would also know how to “get by” in the geomedia city. As a powerful urban “dweller” inhibiting these skills, s/he would also contribute to the reproduction of the geomedia city as a normative ideal (see Hartmann & Jansson, this issue).

To conclude, let me troubleshoot the CWS version of eliteness and, in continuation of this, problematize theoretical positions that imagine eliteness and precariousness as dichotomous. Although an undertaking of this kind could certainly extend over more pages than I here have at my disposal, I shall point to two specific circumstances that are indicative of the *dialectics of CWS eliteness*. First, we need to acknowledge that the kind of eliteness that CWS (re)produce in
many respects is a brutal form of eliteness, one which may both exploit and create precarious ontologies, even within materially affluent subjects. Cues for such a perspective on eliteness can be derived from Berlant’s (2011) concept of “cruel optimism” as well as Thurlow’s (2021) account of the “joyful violence of premium.” Both of these conceptualizations point to the ways in which the desirable life, while presented as easily achieved, remains out of reach for many, potentially including ever so hardworking “spatial experts.” Second, CWS eliteness embodies precariousness also to the extent that it relies on the precarious labor of the mobile working class. Such workers arrive to CWS not as (young, white, male) digital nomads thirsty for coffee, yoga, or networking, but to brew the coffee, clean the yoga venues, and serve the Wi-Fi networks. I welcome future studies that can increase our understanding of how CWS eliteness is experienced by those involved in the symbolic construction and material realization of coworking dreams.

**Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and guest editors for their valuable and constructive comments. I would also like to thank my colleagues at Karlstad University and University of Oslo for fruitful discussions and feedback on previous versions of this manuscript.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**ORCID iD**

Karin Fast https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4704-5017

**Notes**

1. For a supplementary analysis of Kolgruvan, see Fast and Jansson (2019, Chap. 4).
2. These were apps found when searching for “coworking” (date of search: September 22, 2021).

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**Author Biography**

Karin Fast, PhD, is an associate professor in media and communication studies at Karlstad University, Sweden. She has published on the topics of media work, mediatization, transmedia, and geomedia in international, peer-reviewed journals. Her recent books include *Transmedia Work: Privilege and Precariousness in Digital Modernity* (with A. Jansson, 2019, Routledge). She is currently conducting research within the project *Intrusive Media, Ambivalent Users and Digital Detox (Digitox)*, led by Professor Trine Syvertsen at University of Oslo.