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Practices of Conviviality and the Social and Political Theory of Convivialism

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Frank Adloff

Abstract

The working paper firstly discusses the *Convivialist Manifesto* which was published by a group of French academics in 2013. Secondly, the concepts of convivialism as a social and political theory and conviviality as a lived practice are compared. Finally, a normative model of modes of conviviality is developed. Associative self-organisation is decisive for the theory and practice of conviviality. Exchange without remuneration and self-organised gathering can be seen as the basis of a convivial social order which is differentiated from a solely material and monetarily defined version of prosperity and the good life.

Keywords: convivialism | conviviality | social theory | civil society

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1. Introduction

25 years after the end of the Cold War and the systemic rivalry between capitalism and real-existing socialism, the global community is confronted with a number of crises: wars, new nationalisms, social inequalities and cultural divisions, as well as climate change and other ecological dangers. To be sure, we can hardly speak of the prophesied 'end of history' (Francis Fukuyama) in democracy and human rights. Given this situation, a group of mainly French academics and intellectuals released a manifesto in 2013 which speaks of a reversal and, what is more, a positive vision of living together: the *Convivialist Manifesto*. The term convivialism is used to show that it is essential to develop a new philosophy and practical forms of peaceful coexistence. The manifesto attempts to make clear that another world is not only possible – because we can already see many forms of conviviality – but is absolutely necessary. Is this just another tawdry critique of society and well-meaning appeal for change? What effect will the call to action of some philosophers and social scientists have, one will – and must – ask.

2. The Convivialist Manifesto

The uniqueness of the present manifesto (*Convivialist Manifesto* 2014) is that a large group of 64 academics with very different political convictions put their differences aside and consensually point out the undesirable developments of contemporary societies. The manifesto identifies two main causes here: the primacy of utilitarian, ergo selfish thinking and acting, and the absolutisation of the belief in the almost holy power of economic growth. On the other hand, these developments are juxtaposed with a positive vision of a good life: It is first and foremost important to direct our attention to the quality of social relationships and our relation to nature. Various well-known academics and intellectuals have worked on this vision, including Alain Caillé, Chantal Mouffe, Edgar Morin, Serge Latouche, Eva Illouz and Ève Chiapello. On the theoretical level, convivialism ambitiously strives for a synthesis of various political ideologies: liberalism, socialism, communism and anarchism. Civil liberties, state social policies, radical universal equality and self-government should all be linked to one another. Politically, the spectrum ranges from leftist Catholicism to socialistic and alternative economic perspectives to the members of Attac and intellectuals from the area of poststructuralism. The group of signers now includes internationally influential public intellectuals like Jeffrey Alexander, Robert Bellah, Luc Boltanski, Axel Honneth and Hans Joas. Moreover, and this seems to me to be particularly relevant for the political reverberation of the text, the manifesto was also discussed and signed by many civil society organisations and initiatives in France.

Convivialism denotes a theoretical position that is based on a basic tendency toward human cooperation and emphasises the necessity of democratic understanding by

means of its social realisation; conviviality, by contrast, is the lived praxis of this idea. The convivial manifesto therefore goes beyond the previous uses of the term conviviality by making it into an 'ism'. Out of an attribute of social relations which was born at cheerful dinner parties and in the idea of hospitality, something new has emerged. While the term conviviality names a praxis of living together, the 'ism' makes clear that, on a theoretical level, the systematisation of social and political-theoretical perspectives must stand in the foreground. In this way, similar differences like those existing between the terms 'liberal' and 'liberalism' can be grasped. The focus is consequently a dual one: We can address convivialism as a social scientific or political idea on the one hand, and conviviality as a lived praxis on the other.

The proximity to the term civil society is obvious: This term describes not only a practice of voluntary association, but also normatively labels it with the attribute of civility and even refers to a utopian project of self-government (cf. Adloff 2017). The thesis asserted in this contribution is thus that conviviality is inscribed in human coexistence as a telos – anthropologically, it is inscribed in the structure of human orders of interaction. This also means that one can find conviviality at all times and in all cultures – even if it is never realised completely.

Both terms (conviviality and convivialism) demonstrate that, from the perspective of the authors, we are especially social beings who are dependent on one another. The subtitle of the French original is *Déclaration d'interdépendance*, alluding to the American *Declaration of Independence*. Consequently, the authors ask the question of how we really want to coexist with one another: the quality of social relations, that of a greater communities and the question of how we want to organise society politically, are at the heart of their considerations. In doing so, social relations are not only seen as a mere means to an end, but above all as an end in themselves. The manifesto tries to formulate principles of a new convivial order and centrally highlights (p. 30): "The only legitimate kind of politics is one that is inspired by principles of common humanity, common sociality, individuation, and managed conflict". The convivialist 'test', as it were, thus consists in boiling social and political modes of organisation down to four questions:

- a) Is the principle of common humanity and equal human dignity respected, or do some groups place themselves above others and externalise the negative effects of their actions onto others?
- b) Is the principle of a common sociality realised, based on the idea that our greatest good lies in the quality of social relations?

These two somewhat communitarian perspectives are contrasted with two somewhat disassociating principles:

c) Is the principle of individuation respected, i.e., that we all are different from each other, that we should be recognised and respected in our individuality?

d) Lastly, are conflicts allowed on the one hand, but on the other hand controlled so that they do not escalate?

Convivialism therefore formulates decidedly normative principles for the evaluation of social and political orders. These are based on the reflexivisation and normativisation of everyday practices of conviviality.

3. Conviviality and the Roots of the Manifesto

The term conviviality, as it is used by the writers of the manifesto, originated in 19th-century France. *Convivialité* is very common in contemporary French and has also established itself in English as a common loan word as well as more recently as a term in discussions about cohabitation in immigrant societies. Its coinage can be traced back to Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin and his book *Physiologie du goût* from the year 1825. The gastrophilosopher understood conviviality as the situation, common at the table, when different people come together over a good long meal and time passes swiftly in excited conversations.

The initiative for the manifesto goes back to a 2010 colloquium in Japan, at which the terms conviviality and convivialism were discussed with particular reference to Ivan Illich. The Austrian-American philosopher and author was a radical critic of technology and growth, and in his 1973 book *Tools for Conviviality* introduced precisely this term. The book was well received internationally and was brought to general attention in France by André Gorz. Illich uses the term 'convivial' to describe a society which places sensible barriers on the growth of its tools, be they technology-based or institutions. If the growth of a technology is not limited, according to Illich, we see the tendency of its benefits to reverse and lead to consequential societal problems (here, atomic energy springs to mind). Illich contends that control over societal tools should not lie in the hands of infrastructures and expert systems, but rather with the community – it is only in this way can conviviality be reached. Yet, in order for this to happen, a radical reshaping of societal institutions along convivial criteria is needed.

The volume *De la convivialité* written by Caillé, Humbert, Latouche and Viveret in 2011 produces two more threads of discourse which flow into the formulation of the convivialist vision. One of them is the anti-utilitarian thinking of Alain Caillé (and Marcel Mauss), and the other is the growth and economic critique of Patrick Viveret and Serge Latouche.

The most prominent advocate of the demand for degrowth (*décroissance*) is the economist Serge Latouche. He calls for a society of simple prosperity (*société d'abondance frugale*) and (with Viveret) for a redefinition of wealth, which should overcome the logic of economic quantification used by the GDP (Latouche 2009, 2011). In his view, a convivial society must radically question the idea of economic growth and limit itself. New forms of economic activity are demanded that break the cycle of the permanent creation of more and more and principally unlimited needs. He is moreover interested in overcoming the 'religion of the economic' and the concept of the *homo oeconomicus*. The irrationality of this belief is shown in the fact that there is no clear positive correlation between monetary prosperity and happiness and satisfaction.

The question as to which logic of action a convivial society could draw upon beyond the pressure to grow is primarily addressed by Alain Caillé, who can be seen as the real *spiritus rector* of the convivialist manifesto (cf. Caillé 2011). For him, the most decisive question is how humans can live together free of community and conformity pressure without (in Mauss and Caillé's words) butchering each other. Caillé sees an answer in the 'paradigm of the gift', whose development he has played a decisive role in in the last 20 years and which can be traced back to the sociologist and ethnologist Marcel Mauss. Mauss described how the exchange of gifts between groups of people makes them allies without removing their 'agonality', i.e. their militant conflict. In the agonal gift, humans see each other as just that, humans, and acknowledge each other. Convivialism takes up this idea and stresses that alone the acknowledgement of a common humanity and a common sociality can be the basis for convivial global coexistence. Radical and universal equality is thus a condition of convivial coexistence, which in the manifesto leads to the demand for two income restrictions (Manifesto, p. 32): a minimum and a maximum. No one should fall under a minimum income and no one has the right to accumulate unlimited wealth.

Caillé can also be seen as the intellectual head of the so-called M.A.U.S.S. movement (Mouvement Anti-Utilitariste dans les Sciences Sociales, or Anti-Utilitarian Movement in the Social Sciences). Most of the theoretical ideas developed there are based on Marcel Mauss' essay *The Gift* from the year 1925. The character of the gift – according to Mauss – is ambivalent, as the exchange of gifts moves between the pole of voluntariness and spontaneity on the one hand and the pole of social obligation on the other. Giving a gift is a deeply equivocal process which is not understood by Mauss as being economicistic in the sense of selfishness nor as moralistic in the sense of pure altruistic giving. Instead, Mauss emphasises the agonal side of giving: one cannot ignore the gift, one must react to it as a challenge which one either answers or refuses to answer (which is as well equal to a response, only a negative one, cf. Bedorf 2010). The motive to give, according to Caillé (2008) may span a coordinate cross made

up of interest vs. empathy/friendship (*aimance*) as well as duty vs. spontaneity. The motivation to give a gift cannot be reduced to one of these poles. At the same time, every form of sociality is dependent on the gift. Without it, in other words, without trust and 'advance payments' of which one does not know exactly whether they will be required or not, no sociality can be formed.

With his essay, Mauss by no means wanted to deliver simple descriptions and explanations of the structures of premodern societies. His ambitions were higher, he pursued a kind of archaeology: firstly, to examine the surrounding contemporary 'premodern societies'; secondly, to describe the predecessors of our modern society; and thirdly, to prove on sociological grounds that the moral and economy of the gift: "still function in our own societies, in unchanging fashion and, so to speak, hidden, below the surface, and as we believe that in this we have found one of the human foundations on which our societies are built" (Mauss 1990: 4). Consequently, Mauss indeed had questions that pertained to the present as well, though he stood in the French tradition of the critique of utilitarianism and sympathised strongly with the cooperative movement and other concepts and practices of autonomous self-administration (Fournier 2006: 106ff). In doing so, he based his political interventions on the double critique of utilitarian individualism, on the one hand, and Bolshevist state-centrism on the other.

A third principle was important to Mauss: solidarity as a form of mutual respect by means of exchanging gifts, which itself is based on social ties and reciprocal indebtedness. For him, the crux of the matter lay in the fact that modern social ties increasingly follow the model of exchange, the market and the contract: "It is our western societies who have recently made man an 'economic animal'. But we are not yet all creatures of this genus. [...] *Homo oeconomicus* is not behind us, but lies ahead [...]" (Mauss 1990: 76). In contrast to the later theoretical approaches of modernisation and differentiation, Mauss presumed that, even in modern market societies, the practical logic of the gift cannot be completely erased and that it forms a 'rock' of morality.

Caillé developed more and more from a social theoretician of the gift to a reformed political protagonist of the M.A.U.S.S. movement, to a champion of a 'third way' beyond the absolutisation of state and market. Since the 1990s he has voiced his views in political debates, in particular because he is convinced of the relevance of the gift discourse for addressing practical sociopolitical problems, such as for example how they are discussed in the debate about universal basic income, the shortening of the workday, the strengthening of civil society or in the context of globalisation criticism. He sees for example in alternative, civically organised economic forms the possibility to link non-capitalist modes of transferring goods with the traits of respect and bonding inherent to the gift. Here, he is not interested in replacing the capitalist economic form but rather supplementing it with alternative forms of exchange. For Caillé, a voluntary

association lies in two or more individuals pooling their material resources, their knowledge and their activity for a common end which is not primarily geared toward profit-making (Caillé 2000). In this way, the area of civil society is connected with the possibility to transfer forms of the primary sociality of the gift to the public sphere. After all, the political sphere is also dependent on relations where gifts are necessary.

In this way Caillé and the other authors of the manifesto contribute to a specific line of political thinking in France. The French democracy theorists Claude Lefort and Cornelius Castoriadis in their analysis of Soviet-style totalitarianism moved toward theories on libertarian democracy, or the autonomous society. Starting in the 1940s, they worked (alongside Lyotard) in the journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie* on a critique of Stalinist totalitarianism and Marxist theory (cf. Rödel 1990: 8 ff.) and in doing so came to the idea of an autonomous, self-generating civil society able to emancipate itself from the subjugation of a single powerholder. Both authors have in common the critique of a state-centred political understanding which views civil society as a depoliticised sphere. Power should remain in civil society and not merge in the independent institutions of the state. Democratic processes and institutions rule how civil society can exercise power over itself on the basis of conflicts. Furthermore, in Lefort's words (1990: 293), the place of power must "remain empty" in democracy. Sovereigns used to literally embody political power. A democracy however must not try to occupy the former place of the sovereigns with new symbolic instances such as 'the people', 'class' or 'nation' as we then face the threat of an antidemocratic fiction of totality. The surmounting of social and political antagonisms – as totalitarian societies claimed for themselves – de facto means the totalitarian elimination of democracy.

Nor does the political idea of the manifesto presume a state-centred concept of politics; instead, the idea of civic self-organisation shifts into focus here. This can be linked to the so-called political difference between the political (*le politique*) and politics (*la politique*) which has been discussed intensely in recent years (cf. Marchart 2010): The political is for Claude Lefort, Alain Caillé and the other authors clearly not to be reduced to the instituted sphere of politics (the right to vote, state institutions, etc.) (cf. Caillé 2014).

In this context, Cornelius Castoriadis' concept of a societal imaginary takes on significant meaning. Castoriadis' blueprint (1984) of a theory of the imaginary states that society is based on processes of institutionalisation which also always arise out of new cultural creations. This is due to the fact that society, in its conceptions, always refers to images of the future, ideas which Castoriadis terms the 'imaginary'. These new creations of meaning reach beyond existing societal forms and symbolisations. Imaginary meanings give responses to questions like 'Who are we as a community, what do we want, what are we missing?' Societies constitute themselves by delivering in their actions factual,

and thus frequently only implicit answers to these questions. The imaginary of modern contemporary societies for Castoriadis consists in considering oneself to be entirely rational. Yet the aims connected with this – growth, rationalisation and world domination – are arbitrary and pseudo-rational; they take on almost threatening forms when one considers for instance how independent unbridled technology has become. Here, the instituted (i.e. technology) has become independent vis-à-vis ‘instituted society’.

To consider another – convivial – society thus means, in line with Castoriadis’ thought, to consider new forms of the societal imaginary, to imagine and to create new societal blueprints. In this sense, the current neoliberal imaginary can almost be viewed as the mirror image of totalitarianism. Totalitarianism eliminated civil liberties and the political in the name of a total society. Neoliberalism eliminates solidarities and social ties in the name of civil liberties and market decisions. Caillé (2014a: 76) therefore speaks of global “parcellitarisme”. In the view of the convivialists, collective alternatives must be striven for. For that, a battle of opinion must be fought for hegemony, entirely à la Gramsci’s understanding. Indeed, the theses and topics of the convivialists are geared toward becoming practical, i.e., being heard and finding resonance in civil society. The convivialist perspective thus politically, affectively and symbolically aims at the big picture and not at overly detailed problem-solving, at individual policies. To develop from this idea a systematic social and political theory in the stricter sense is, however, still pending.

4. Practices of Conviviality

Yet the manifesto also contains indications that lived and shared practices are of great importance for the development of conviviality. It is a lived morality and habitualised practices of evaluation that are in mind when the manifesto speaks of “common decency”, for example. This expression of George Orwell’s, which the political philosopher Jean-Claude Michéa (2014 [2007]) reintroduced into the debate, refers to the idea that humans are not primarily rational egoists, but rather show a psychological and cultural disposition toward generosity and solidarity which the normative structures of politics and society can be founded upon. At the same time, Michéa invokes the paradigm of the gift à la Caillé and the other M.A.U.S.S. authors in order to demonstrate that people show specific virtues or dispositions toward generosity and loyalty. Socialism should be anchored in these basic virtues (according to Michéa and Orwell). To disregard or overlook them was always the trademark of “ideologies and traditional powerholders”, Michéa contends (ibid.: 126).

However, much follows from this accentuation, this positive anthropological conception of humans. Modern liberalism for Michéa is built on the opposite conception of humans. A war of all against all is famously hindered in liberalism by channelling private sins

into the economic realm; otherwise one is subjugated to the impersonal mechanism of law. Questions of morals and values, for their part, are banished from the public arena. The human image of the utilitarians provides the fundament for this – the “axiomatistics formed by self-interest in Europe” in the 17th century (ibid.: 123). Seeing as such a society robs itself of all normative structures, it destroys the conditions for developing a sense of community and citizenship. Michéa thus appeals for the establishment of the socialist primate of decency before that of justice. This also includes recognition of the fact that one should take seriously the lower classes in their insistence on decency, tradition, morals and order and understand these tendencies as potentially socialist and anti-economic virtues. Both totalitarianism and liberalism drown the common man “in the icy waters of egotistical calculation” (ibid.: 148). This is because both are based on the same negative image of humans. While liberalism takes people ‘as they are’, totalitarianism wants to create new humans. Yet, this negative image can become a self-fulfilling prophecy inasmuch as (neo)liberalism has now been training egoism for decades and has created a context in which egoism is recommended and is a generally accepted pattern of behaviour.

The great strength of the manifesto, in my view, lies in the fact that the above philosophies are not being handed down to Northern societies from the outside by the theoreticians of convivialism; they are already omnipresent, they simply need to be strengthened. Practically speaking, conviviality is in fact already being lived in a variety of social constellations: most notably in the context of family and friendships, in which the logic of the gift and not that of utilitarian calculation still counts. Outside of it, we see conviviality in hundreds of thousands of civic associative projects worldwide: in volunteering, the third sector, in the solidarity-based economy, in cooperatives and communes, in moral consumption, in NGOs, in peer-to-peer networks, Wikipedia, social movements, fair trade, the commons movement and many more. People are not only interested in themselves, they are also interested in others, they can stand up for others spontaneously and empathetically.

The cultural anthropologist David Graeber says that people are actually already living ‘communism’ in their everyday manifestation of esteem, offering of aid and their non-calculated generosity. Even modern (capitalist) societies are built on a foundation of ‘communist’ relations: “*Communism is the fundament of human coexistence*” (Graeber 2012: 102, italicised in the original). Relationships among family, friends and colleagues, spontaneous cooperations, friendly gestures and conversations – for Graeber, all of these are examples of an everyday communist morality that cannot be adequately grasped by utilitarian or normativist social theories. Whenever we are not keeping a tally of the exchange that took place, we are dealing with forms of giving, trust,

community spirit, commitment, and love that are decoupled from the principle of *do ut des*.

Empirically speaking, this form of conviviality is currently under investigation in the area of multiculturalism. Present studies (e.g. Laurier and Philo 2006; Wessendorf 2014) are interested in how for example people in multi-ethnic districts structure and organise their cohabitation each and every day. It has been discovered here that there are a variety of practices of respectful dealings between people who have their origin precisely in the dispositions described by Caillé, Graeber and Michéa:

“Conviviality is established in different routine practices of giving and taking, talking and sharing, exchanging news and goods and so on [...]. The banal interactions across social and ethnic boundaries give a sense of togetherness” (Nowicka and Vertovec 2014: 346).

Tensions and conflicts are not disregarded here, on the contrary: They occur permanently and must be negotiated and translated. In contrast to the concept of cosmopolitanism, it is not the elites who are the centre of analysis, but daily interactions, mainly in urban spaces, “where local residents engage in practices and discourses of living together, engaging with, confronting and embracing differences” (Heil 2015: 319). Conviviality represents in this sense a form of minimal sociality and minimal consensus that functions as a competence of intracultural, daily negotiation. It is not a coincidence that in these discussions conceptual support is found in the Castilian term *convivencia*, which characterises the coexistence of Jews, Muslims and Christians in Spain in the Middle Ages.

5. An Analytical and Normative Model of Conviviality

The way convivial exchanges are organised par excellence is free association, in which the principle of non-remuneration, of reciprocal giving and taking come into effect (cf. Adloff 2016). Associative, civic self-organisation is decisive for the theory and practice of conviviality. Free exchange without remuneration, self-organised gathering can be seen as the basis of a convivial social order which is differentiated from a solely material and quantitative-monetarily defined version of prosperity and the good life. For Caillé and other convivialists, the following is crucial: One must not (as the traditional versions of socialism did) solely count on state institutions; political changes do not merely happen through parties and states. Even liberalism with its emphasis on markets overlooks the possibilities of societal self-organisation.

Convivial associations show an experimental moment (John Dewey) and revolve around the question of how we want to live with one another – the quality of social relations and coexistence in the greater sense, or the question of how we want to

organise society politically, are the central consideration. Here, social relations are not only seen as a means to an end, but above all also, from an anti-utilitarian point of view, as an end in themselves (Caillé 2014). Following concepts of civility and 'civic action' (cf. Lichterman and Eliasoph 2014), convivial practices are understood as not being limited to one sector (for instance civil society), but can be found in societal fields which aim to intentionally shape social change and social organisation, and at the same time to organise themselves primarily democratically and to imagine a current as well as a future desired 'us': "Participants are coordinating action to improve some aspect of common life in society, as they imagine society" (ibid.: 809).

These practices differ in their aspects of self-organisation, reflexive forming and flexibility from practices in more rigid settings like organisational hierarchies and highly competitive market relations. Convivial practices at the same time primarily differ from the logic of functional differentiation, which identifies logics of action for societal functional systems that are very specific and selective in meaning (cf. Beckert 2014). They moreover try to create modes of living that are not based on exclusivity and the externalisation of costs, but rather are socially and ecologically generalisable (cf. Brand and Wissen 2017).

Convivial ways of life are thus not primarily interest-based or oriented toward self-interest; they show a certain aversion both to hierarchies as well as market-based forms of socialisation. Conviviality is based on forms of self-organisation that can range from minimal standards of civility to forms of solidarity that hinge on relations of giving and respect.

To summarise the previous discussion and elevate it to the level of an analytical and normative model of conviviality, one must differentiate between various dimensions of conviviality which one can understand as a sort of graduated model on the way to a comprehensive, possibly never reachable conviviality.

- (a) Conviviality requires minimal civil standards of nonviolence and tolerance of difference.
- (b) Conviviality means forms of interaction in which people encounter people, and not mutual stereotyping; reifications and denigrative attributions of others are avoided.
- (c) Conviviality stresses equality and self-organisation and calls for non-hierarchical and democratic forms of organisation.
- (d) In convivial relations, one strives to not live at the expense of others, i.e. the externalisation of negative consequences of actions should be avoided.

In such a model, the social sciences would be left with the task of empirically identifying various forms of conviviality and asking what the preconditions of these forms are. Yet

it would be just as important to analyse what stands in the way of different forms of conviviality. The *Convivialist Manifesto* in particular points to a ubiquitous utilitarian culture which undermines forms of conviviality. This may be an important dimension, yet one will still be able to identify many more causes – if they are sought empirically and analytically – as to why human proclivity to and ability of conviviality is hindered again and again by all kinds of institutional orders. Therefore, in order to develop a theoretical programme out of empirical studies on conviviality which represents a political and social theory of conviviality, there remains a long road ahead.

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