

Convivial Futures?

An Introduction

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In 2013, the first *Convivialist Manifesto* (English edition: 2014 [hereafter cited as *FCM*]) was published, initially in French and later in many translations. Since then, many of the social and political problems described in the *FCM* have remained with us, whereas other trajectories are new and unforeseen. This is also the starting point of the *Second Convivialist Manifesto*, which was published in 2020 (Convivialist International 2020 [hereafter cited as *SCM*]). To be a pioneering, public political philosophy, convivialism must succeed in capturing the signs of the times and developing perspectives for the future. As difficult as it is to formulate such positive outlooks, that is precisely what this volume is all about. But let us first take a look at the last few years.

1. Our Times

In recent years, we have seen a strong social and political polarization. In particular, the election of Donald Trump as US president stands out, which entailed a decline in democratic culture in the US. Globally, Trump's presidency challenged many continuities in foreign policy, whether through his willingness to wage trade wars, compromise the importance of human rights, or withdraw from the Paris climate agreement altogether. Bruno Latour (2018) argued some time ago that Trump's presidency represents the first genuinely ecological regime, only under the opposite sign of completely contradicting the idea. For

Trump embodied the clear will to simply carry on as before despite climate change. With his fossil-fuel policy, he abandoned, as it were, the jointly shared and limited space of the Earth. Trump's policy did not care about maintaining a "safe operating space for humanity" (Rockström 2009).

However, the unlimited consumption of resources is nothing new but merely an acceleration of Western hubris and capitalist accumulation, which for centuries has relied on nature as being at human disposal. This is contrasted with another, by now iconic figure: Greta Thunberg, the initiator of the widespread Fridays for Future protests. She has brought climate change to the attention of the public around the world like no one else. Trump's planet knows no limits; Thunberg's Earth trembles under the weight of human beings.

We see such polarization everywhere. While in the summer of 2015 there was still a broad sense of solidarity and a culture of welcome toward the refugees coming to Germany, the mood soon changed and the far-right political party Alternative für Deutschland ("Alternative for Germany") was able to score points with its nationalist and racist platform. It is now represented in all federal state parliaments, and Germany as a country has moved to the right.

Despite the attention given to Fridays for Future, there is now something of a political "yellow vest" factor. Ever since the yellow vests (*gilets jaunes*) took to the crossroads in France in 2018–19 and staged mass demonstrations against President Macron's plans to raise fuel taxes, politicians elsewhere have also feared that any extra spending on climate protection would be another vote for right-wing populist movements and parties. This reveals the current political dilemma: Old left-wing coalitions between parties, trade unions, and the lower classes have broken down, and as long as the additional expenditure for an ecologically 'more sustainable' society is to be shouldered mainly by the lower and middle classes, they can only be persuaded to protect the climate to a very limited extent and may otherwise move to the right. Majorities could only be won for socio-ecological transformation if these classes were also to benefit materially through redistribution policies

from top to bottom. These social and ecological questions are closely interrelated—as not only convivialism, of course, has emphasized.

So far, however, there is hardly a country to be found that has rejected the neoliberal redistribution from the bottom to the top. Social inequalities, especially with regard to wealth distribution, continue to increase unchecked, although the voices calling for caps on wealth inequalities and arguing for wealth taxes and higher inheritance taxes are becoming more urgent. Criticism of the capitalist growth economy is also growing louder. When the *FCM* appeared nine years ago, the call for a post-growth economy still sounded quite exotic or almost absurd in international public discourse. In the meantime, the degrowth movement has become much stronger and more influential across Europe. Many lines of critique come together here: a feminist critique of the economy, an ecological perspective, cultural critique, as well as a critique of asymmetrical Global North–South relations, which continue to be based on (post)colonial, unequal exchange relations and the North externalizing its problems to the South.

In voicing their criticism, many of these movements aim at an extension of democracy and call for a self-imposed limitation in the name of ecology. While the boundaries between classes and citizens should be transcended, new practices of self-limitation are needed at the same time, as this is the only way to guarantee habitability on Earth. The great acceleration in the stress on the Earth system since the end of the Second World War—for example, through CO₂ emissions, energy consumption, water and fertilizer use—urgently needs to be limited, which would also have obvious consequences for Western consumption and lifestyles.

However, many governments and movements are currently opposing the expansion of democracy. In the name of ‘true democracy’ and the ‘true people,’ democratic participation rights as well as opportunities for opposition and critical interventions are being massively restricted and so-called illiberal democracies such as those in Hungary, Russia, Turkey, India, and Brazil strengthened. In many countries, we now observe that civic spaces that rely on the freedoms of expression and assembly are coming under pressure and have been shrinking.

The three principles of order of the second half of the 20th century—liberal democracy, free-market capitalism, and a pluralistic and individualistic culture—are currently no longer showing any great stability or attractiveness. In this phase of change, very different paths can be taken. Right-wing populist movements, illiberal nation-states, and notions of homogeneous communities stand in contrast to movements that advocate a deepening of democracy, want to overcome the logic of growth, and seek to reconcile individualistic with communitarian principles. However, the latter can only have an impact if they are able to illustrate to broad parts of the population what more conviviality could produce in terms of positive outcomes for all, including the non-human world. Therefore, the *SCM*, just like the *FCM*, tries to develop a language that is as inclusive as possible and to build a broad common denominator for convivialist political aspirations. It goes without saying that this inclusive language has to be reinvented and expanded again and again. After all, reflexivity is at the core of the convivialist program, and this volume is an expression of that.

2. Convivialism during and after the Coronavirus Crisis

The coronavirus pandemic, which began in the spring of 2020, has shown which problematic situations were already virulent: for example, the fragility of financial capitalism, the massive digital and educational asymmetries, or the deepening of gender inequalities through the re-feminization of care work. Added to these problems are the consequences of the current crisis management: collapses in the global economy, newly indebted states, rising unemployment, and so forth. Whether the pandemic opens or closes avenues for convivial reform has yet to be decided at the time of this writing (August 2021). It seems clear that many things cannot go on like they have, but it will be important to draw the right conclusions from the crisis.

One lesson that the pandemic has taught us is that existing certainties can be shattered rapidly and that there is no firm base for eternal business as usual. Delusive certainties have been replaced by contin-

gency awareness. On the one hand, new things now seem possible. On the other hand, it is precisely this loss of illusory security and certainty that scares people. Can this fear be socially managed or, better still, made productive?

In the meantime, it is becoming increasingly clear that the coronavirus pandemic is only the beginning. Compared to the consequences of climate change, dealing with COVID-19 is probably just a minor challenge. COVID-19 shows the different levels of temporality we are dealing with. The fact that many viruses have originated in animals, have been transmitted via zoonoses, and that the loss of biodiversity favors pandemics is increasingly becoming common knowledge. And what if the virus did instead originate in a laboratory in Wuhan, and its release is also part of the story of human hubris? Although the pandemic swept across the world in a matter of weeks, the groundwork was laid by a history of ecologically reckless globalization that spans more than a century.

The virus of neoliberalism, in turn, has been circulating for more than 40 years and has fueled the crisis through privatization and cuts in health care. This shows that the severity of the pandemic has an enormous temporal precedence and that these different temporalities overlap. Now that they overlap in this fashion, similar things will most likely happen again soon.

This is because climate change also leads to acute shocks and catastrophes, be they heavy rains with floods, droughts with water and food shortages, or migration from war and heat zones. The problem of climate change—or more generally, the rapidly changing habitability of the Earth—cannot be controlled. Rather, it will be a matter of interlinking social concepts of time with the rhythms of the warming planet. A critique of the modern separation of nature and culture has long been formulated in earth-system sciences, philosophy, and the social sciences. With COVID-19, societies are now even more aware that this separation is invalid, and the SCM itself correctly highlights that there is only one common nature, and humans do not live outside of it.

Since modernity is characterized by a sense of boundlessness and inscribed with ideas of omnipotence and hubris, COVID-19 brings with

it the imposition of having demonstrated the limits of this historical path of development. Many social movements from the North and the South are calling on politicians, businesspeople, and academics to abandon the hubris of world domination that the *SCM* so clearly criticizes. Self-limitation and conviviality among humans and non-humans would have to be considered intrinsically valuable, and one would have to build completely new relationships of meaning that do not negate contingency and interdependence but rather affirm them.

COVID-19 has also made clear how interdependent our world is. It is more evident than ever how all beings (human as well as non-human) depend on each other—even if not symmetrically. Solidarity could grow out of this feeling of interdependence, which was the thesis of the French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1997 [1893]) as early as the end of the 19th century. He related this idea to the nation state; today, these dependencies have become visible to everyone on a global level. But it is not easy to derive a compelling new narrative of progress from this.

One question of the future will be whether fears, segregations, inequalities, and conflicts over resources of all kinds will increase or whether it will be possible not to exacerbate the fear of the future through more individualism and privatism, as has been the case so far, but to mitigate it through more solidarity and convivial solutions. Future hopes for growth, dominance, and prosperity have thus far integrated Western societies, even if these hopes are increasingly proving to be economically unrealistic, socially unjust, and ecologically fatal. Now the task must be to nevertheless develop an attractive vision of living together. Against the fear of losing out to others, new forms of conviviality must be established. It is precisely in response to this that convivialism is trying to formulate new positive answers.

3. The Way Ahead

Convivialism presents itself as a political philosophy destined to follow in the footsteps of the great ideologies of modernity—liberalism, socialism, anarchism, communism. These ideologies are no longer able to

enlighten us on either the present state of the world or what it could or should look like tomorrow, if only because they have completely failed to anticipate the environmental crisis and global warming. Convivialism is therefore beginning to find some resonance. The *SCM* has already been translated into six languages. But so far, convivialism has suffered from a major flaw compared to its predecessors, which explains why its audience is not yet broader: It does not ‘say’ enough. It does not say enough because it does not hold out the prospect of a bright future or at least a happier one for the majority, one that is worth fighting for, or even worth making sacrifices to bring it about. This part of the narrative is what its predecessors knew how to tell. Liberalism gave hope for the rule of autonomy, the end of submission to authority or despotism. Socialism promised equality, or at least a certain degree of equality, thanks to the regulatory intervention of the state. Anarchism trumped liberalism by adding the hope of economic self-sufficiency, of self-management; and communism one-upped socialism by adding fraternity to equality. Convivialism inherits all these promises and tries to combine them by *sublating* them (“*aufheben*” in German). But this sublation is still largely a conceptual principle. It now needs to be given flesh, breath, life, and visibility. This is the thinking behind the request we sent to the authors of this issue.

Announcing a convivial world for tomorrow might seem both excessively timid and desperately ambitious—excessively timid compared to what yesterday’s secular religions such as socialism, communism, or liberal modernization promised us. All of them held out the prospect of a better and brighter tomorrow. We would end all forms of domination or exploitation of man by man. Or, at the very least, everyone would see their material living conditions assured, their health protected, their education sufficiently guaranteed, and would become fully respected citizens. These great hopes have been fading away over the last few decades. Today, for a whole range of reasons (ecological, economic, political, epidemiological, social, moral) that need not be spelled out here, it is rather despair and a dreary future that looms on the horizon. We no longer look to the future full of hope; on the contrary, the horizon of the future has closed. Claiming that tomorrow’s world could

be more convivial, less violent, less unjust, more secure, more symbiotic or ecological seems desperate and almost foolish.

Nevertheless, the indication of a more convivial future also comes in the wake of the *SCM*. The *SCM*'s main idea can be summarized as follows: Despite the unprecedented progress in the fields of science and technology, the darkest predictions about our own and the warming Earth's future have a high probability of coming true (the coronavirus pandemic does not encourage us to be more optimistic). Our only chance of escaping a dreadful fate is to create a post-neoliberal or post-growth society as soon as possible. The *SCM* depicts some of its possible ecological, political, social, and economic features. However, it is obvious that a convivial society has no chance of coming into existence if a global shift in public opinion in all countries is not triggered, a sort of axiological great transformation. But how can one hope, even for a second, that the power of Putin, Xi Jinping, Bolsonaro, Sissi, Modi, Trump, Wall Street, and the fossil-fuel industry will diminish? Let us remember, however, the strength of the republican ideal, which was able to overcome the absolutist monarchies, the power of socialist or communist (for better or for worse) or fascist (definitely for worse) ideals. Moreover, before these secular religions, there was the enormous energy generated by Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, or Buddhism. A comparable energy must once again be mobilized today.

One might say, however, that the rise in influence of the universal religions or quasi-secular religions has taken a long time, sometimes centuries; but now we live in times of absolute urgency. This is true, but our time is one of continuous acceleration: Ideas circulate and passions are unleashed at a speed unimaginable only a few years ago. Often for the worse—but why should it not be for the better?

The *SCM* has presented a brief but reasonable analysis of the situation in which we find ourselves and sketches one possible desirable future. It has been a necessary work of theoretical synthesis. Yet, it is also necessary to be able to speak to as many people as possible and awaken widespread passions for a better future. We are going to need this passion to preserve a viable world. For this, conceptual work is notoriously insufficient. The most urgent thing now is to show as many

people as possible what they would gain from a shift to a post-neoliberal and post-growth convivialist future. It would be a world in which, at least in the richest countries, living better means less material wealth, with less money for the wealthy or upper middle classes, and much less exploitation of humans and non-human beings.

What steps are needed to make life better and more convivial? This volume brings together contributions that address this question and attempt to create sketches of a convivial future. This does not preclude us from having a theoretical debate on the status of convivialism or reflecting on dystopias and thus showing the multiple and major obstacles that convivialism will have to face. But the primary objective is to collect accounts of another future world, one that is attractive to an Italian worker, a Spanish peasant, a farmer in Senegal, an inhabitant of a favela in Rio or a slum in Bombay, an Egyptian employee, an Iraqi doctor, a Chinese student, but also one that a French or German company director would be happy to live in.

Whether the future will be more convivial in this sense is decided by our actions in the present, which in turn are guided by the ideas we have about the future. Our bold bet is therefore that convivialist ideas about the future can help decide which future becomes the present.

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