Conviviality to Reanimate the World

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Is it possible to imagine a convivial world for tomorrow? One that springs to mind is *Ecotopia*, a "semi-utopian" novel by Ernest Callenbach, published in 1975. Brice Matthieussent (2018 [1975]: 11; my translation), who wrote the preface for the French edition, states that it is not "the fictional description of a perfect world but of a perfectible world that would nevertheless be on the right track." Its story illustrates a concrete and desirable path that began with the secession of three western American states—California, Oregon, and Washington—and their reunion in Ecotopia. It is an inspiring fiction, both a manifesto and a cry of warning. Instead of an accomplished convivial world, perhaps we should imagine a convivial path?

Taking this route diverts us from the initial question. If the future is largely unpredictable, it is certain that the world will not be convivial if, in seeking tomorrow, we go beyond present worlds and follow the temptation to state abstract, ideal principles, oblivious in their projection to both the dangers and the potentialities of the present. If convivialism is a political art for living together, for shaping the world, then it is a lucid experience of this present, a resistance, a test, so much so that our concrete experiences bear the stigmata of the end of worlds, of plunder, of the destruction of living environments, of the reign of force and injustice, of capitalist chaos. The terrifying accounts in the autumn of 2020 that came out of Oregon in the United States, mixing pandemic, enormous fires, extreme right-wing militias patrolling the streets of Portland, and racist crimes, were approaching apocalyptic dystopias (Raymond 2020). They have demonstrated what is at stake.

Conviviality is also a daily challenge in the wake of the concrete effects of the terrifying utopia, dressed up in the robes of freedom, called "neo-liberal," which is producing humans who are increasingly atomized, precarious, lonely and massified, controlled, detached from earthly ties and dependent on a sprawling megamachine that is accelerating the war on life. If "convivial" means "a modern society of responsibly limited tools," as Ivan Illich (1975 [1973]: 12) wrote, it might seem inaccessible at a time when technical and industrial infrastructures have crossed thresholds that confine the Earth, bodies, and minds in a universe that deprives us of our ability to breathe, our sensations, and our autonomy. The convivial approach is then contained in the art of blocking, diverting, dismantling, abandoning, and inventing new convivial tools, both technical and institutional ones. In France, the success of the cooperative *L'atelier paysan*, which designs tools that are compatible with agro-ecology instead of equipment for war against the land, is one example among many others.

By determinedly walking this thorny path, lest we give in to the *hubris* that conviviality would like to avoid, we do not encounter the world in the singular but rather single and entangled worlds. Alongside the deafening world of the winners, there are sleepwalking and silent worlds; and also worlds that have disappeared, become mutilated, abandoned, rendered invisible, or are in the process of collapse; and finally, other worlds that emerge from dissident and resistant communities committed to living together in the environments of life, to taking care of humans and the Earth. To walk this path is to experience vulnerability, to go to the extremes of this experience, not to overcome it but to cultivate the hope of an awakening and of new solidarities.

Convivialism is also a way of meeting worlds that are confronted with the Western tradition, as is the case with many indigenous peoples who survived the loss of their world several centuries ago. A convivial approach takes their cosmologies, thoughts, and practices seriously, opening up toward and allowing oneself to be decentered and destabilized by other points of view and restoring a relationship to the world and to the Earth that is more complex and subtle than the dominant reductionism. This is the approach of "Amazonian perspectivism"

analyzed by Viveiros de Castro (1998). Conviviality is thus no longer just an ethic and a politics of human relationships. It extends to other existing terrestrial beings in order to share a world. It is a strategy for survival.

If there is a crucial decentering, it is precisely that of anthropocentrism and of the great separation between nature and culture, mind and body, which is at the heart of Western culture. The detachment from the Earth, from its communities of living beings, excludes any conviviality between humans and non-humans. And it authorizes the separation between humans themselves. In the same way, it denies the spiritual part of nature and the natural part of humans. Seeking to climb to the top of the evolutionary ladder, as sovereign subjects and the ultimate species, with the promise of human perfection and exceptionalism reduces us to simplified, lonely human beings, entirely proprietors of ourselves and of the world, exiled from our earthly condition, from our living environments, deprived of relations with the thousands of organisms that weave the web of life and with the natural entities that shelter us and threaten us as we ignore and destroy them. The last step on this ladder is toward the trans-human; the others have failed, and before we destroy ourselves, we should leave the ladder and accept our vulnerability among the living.

The Earth, the source of life, has become a globe, a narrow, external totality, a resource at the service of human *well-being*. Colonialism, capitalism, and industrialism have been able to nourish themselves on it and organize the unlimited extraction of the wealth that it makes available. This naturalist ontology, in the words of Philippe Descola, is recent and singular in the history of humanity. After the Renaissance, writes historian and ecofeminist philosopher Carolyn Merchant (1990: 68), "a slow but unidirectional alienation from the immediate daily organic relationship that had formed the basis of human experience from the earliest times was occurring." It has allowed the naturalization of a section of humanity—the uncivilized, the barbaric, the female—and has justified colonial domination and patriarchy. It has ignored the web of life, the multiple interdependencies that constitute us. Philosopher Glenn Albrecht (2019) recalls, not without mischief, the early contribution in

this field of women biologists, often marginalized, Elyne Mitchell, Lynn Margulis, or Rachel Carson and her seminal book *Silent Spring* (1962).

A convivial world would seek to re-establish these links to dethrone human, virilist arrogance. Experiences of vulnerability on an unprecedented scale, as well as scientific work showing the role of cooperation, altruism, and conviviality in evolution, instead of domination, competition, and force, should facilitate this task. Not to mention the research in evolutionary biology that attests to the complex cognitive forms in other living beings. Life is not a struggle of competing autonomous entities. Human exceptionalism and separation, which are the hallmarks of rationality, have shriveled reason and plunged us into darkness—to the point of threatening the continuation of life.

The Australian ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood, who since the 1970s has exposed the dead-end of the belief in the discontinuity between humans and other-than-humans, made her encounter with a saltwater crocodile the philosophical experience of such a decentering. "Being food for other animals shakes our image of human mastery. As eaters of others who can never ourselves be eaten in turn by them or even conceive of ourselves in edible terms, we take, but do not give" (Plumwood 2012: 19). This is another way of thinking about the ecological catastrophe as a breakdown in the system of giving and the triple obligation of *giving–receiving–giving back*, which, in the face of a de-animated nature, an inert matter, would make no sense.

To rediscover an animated nature is also to regain its vital capacity and our own ungovernable part in a time when it is actually under threat. Thus, Plumwood invites us to seriously devise an intentional strategy for other-than-humans in order to *negotiate* our membership in an ecological community. She calls for a philosophical, non-doctrinaire animism that is embodied in a way of living, a poetics of existence, an attentive presence driven by the gratitude for experiencing ourselves as alive. This materialist animism intersects with the work of ethologists who confirm the intelligence of natural entities and their intentionality: They are neither mindless things nor machines responding to stimuli. Animism in the "developed" world is often brandished like a scarecrow, whereas "humanity is [actually] universally and phenomenologically an-

imistic," write Alain Caillé, Philippe Chanial, and Fabrice Flipo (2013: 15; my translation). This rejection is nourished by a notion of animism defined in the colonial tradition and in the terms of dualism by the belief in the presence of humanoid spirits in inanimate matter. It was the basis of the criminal split between "us," the rational civilized, and "them," the obscurantist animists. The world could be enlightened again by the spirit of things, places, and living beings on Earth, and by life as a convivial relationship with others.

Thus, if conviviality, in the wake of Ivan Illich (1975 [1973]: 64), supposes to dismantle the world as a "technological totality," it is also the mechanistic vision of nature that needs to be undermined. The path that Illich opened toward a radical ecology must still be explored. Defining the convivial society as a new way "to articulate the triadic relationship between persons, tools, and a new collectivity" (ibid.: 12), his ecological thinking focuses on the limits of the Earth in relation to the globality of the hyper-industrialized world that was taking shape half a century before he published *Tools for Conviviality*. This was the major and unacknowledged issue of that era, which was all about endless growth and development and which triggered the chaos of the present world by exceeding these limits. Our present age, faced with the dangers of life extinction and climate chaos, demands a new look at nature, not only in its limits to industrial excess but in its potentialities: "It's a matter of being *open to experiences of nature as powerful, agentic and creative, making space in our culture for an animating sensibility and vocabulary*" (Plumwood 2009: 126). If it is indeed a question of humans freeing themselves from the prison of overpowered machines, 'welfare bureaucrats,' and tools that disrupt the balance between man and nature, this balance requires a decentering. This would enable us to discover ourselves as empathic beings and bodies attached to an ecological web and to be sensitive again to limits, dependencies, and entanglements with other-than-human worlds. Perhaps in this way we can learn all the valuable lessons from the current pandemic and other disasters.

Being attentive to the worlds and voices of others is a way of regaining control of our destiny in order to avoid a fatal end to the present catastrophes. Cultivating our attachments gives substance to concrete

utopias, to our ways of cultivating, inhabiting, commuting, working, and sharing. It is a commitment to the beauty of the world. On January 1, 2021, the Zapatistas published *A Declaration…. for Life*, which has already been signed by hundreds of groups around the world (EZLN 2021). They will visit all five continents to share it. Let us welcome them.

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