Is Convivialism the Answer? Depends on the Question

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The first *Convivialist Manifesto* (2014 [hereafter cited as *FCM*]) and the *Second Convivialist Manifesto* (Convivialist International 2020) propose a number of values and principles for how people can live together which one can only find appealing. As an intellectual exercise, too, the *Manifestos* are an admirable endeavor, taking us beyond the usual model of individuals or small collections of co-authors writing articles, books, blog posts and the like, to a genuine collaboration across a wide variety of theoretical traditions. Aiming to develop a more or less unified collective voice on the possible contours of a post-carbon, post-neoliberal, and post-growth society, the *Manifestos* manage to turn the ever-expanding discussion of conviviality into an *ism*.

We agree convivialist aspirations are clearly congenial, and consideration of how they might be brought about important and valuable. However, although we agree that a future flourishing society will be convivial, we are also mindful that it is unlikely ever to be purely convivial. This is both because not everyone will want to be, and because it might be that responses to non-conviviality might also have to be unconvivial. The *FCM* (23) declares humanity's greatest problem to be: "[H]ow to manage rivalry and violence between human beings. How to get them to co-operate—so that they can develop and each give the best of themselves—and at the same time enable them to compete with one another without resorting to mutual slaughter." Well, yes, but this is hardly a novel observation, it has been humanity's problem for quite some time now, and a great deal of thought has already been given

to these issues. Some massacres have even taken place precisely in the name of solving this problem.

For us, the discussion of convivialism would be considerably strengthened by a more robust engagement with old and familiar problems, to do with evil, conflict, inequality, competition, and power relations. These concerns are not denied in the *Manifestos*, indeed conflicts are recognized, especially inequality and the broader inclination towards hubris, but for us there also needs to be more recognition of the *intractability* of many of these sorts of problems. This has tended to concern *parties of memory* historically more than they have *parties of hope*, but the latter have as much reason as the former to worry about it. Vicious motives and circumstantial incentives to vices, or excessively empowered virtues for that matter, do not occupy center stage in the *Manifestos*. In our view they need to. The philosophical problem is not so much, or at least not only, to establish the virtues of convivialism, but to reflect on its limits, striking an effective balance between it and its opposites, not to mention how it might deal with "the circumstances of politics" (Waldron 1999) as they are and have often been found to be.

Power-relations are various and ever-changing, but they never disappear and they carry terrible risks. It is wise to be aware and wary of them and to think about what may be done to minimize them, both because they are directly threatening in themselves and because where such threats are realized, nothing much else good will occur. Such a warning might seem at once old-fashioned and banal to an up-to-the-minute convivialist, yet it is simply a form of *moral realism* in the sense identified by Philip Selznick (1992: 175), according to which it is "not enough to think of specific evils as problems to be solved or as obstacles to be overcome. Rather, the perspective of moral realism treats some transgressions as dynamic and inescapable. They can be depended on to arise, in one form or another, despite our best efforts to put them down."

And not just *moral realism* but specifically *political* realism is necessary. Politics and the wielding of power more generally are, after all, not just a matter of the ideal ends we should seek, but of conflict, vio-

lence, oppression, domination, their consequences, and what might be needed and feasible to avoid them.

These are the sorts of problems that Hobbes dealt with (and witnessed), however frighteningly and however it might today seem onesidedly. They are the problems that many victims/survivors of humanly devised tragedies also put center stage. They are what led Judith Shklar (1982; 1984; 1989) to enunciate as her first principle of political theory: *put cruelty first*, not to enable it, but to face and deal with it.

They also lead Avishai Margalit (1996: 4) to insist "there is a weighty asymmetry between eradicating evil and promoting good. It is much more urgent to remove painful evils than to create enjoyable benefits," and they led that profoundly Deweyite sociologist, Philip Selznick, to worry that his mentor John Dewey had failed to recognize the weight of evil in the world. Since Selznick was very much a disciple of Dewey, he never abandoned the values he shared with him, many of them as Frank Adloff (2020) notes, of a convivialist temper.

Whereas Shklar thought that dealing with evil was not just primary but actually overwhelming, Selznick disagreed. Animated by Dewey, he insisted that the ultimate ambition of public philosophy was to explore the conditions of a flourishing society, but that required prior attention (not necessarily chronologically but axiologically) to conditions of survival. Only with the latter secured, could one raise one's head and one's hopes.

We also cannot help noticing a tendency to caricature liberalism, or at least simply to lump it together with neoliberalism, as though there were no countervailing political traditions concerned with exactly these sorts of problems, rather merely encouraging ever-expanding materialism. We agree with Selznick (1992: chap. 13) that it is both true that liberal safeguards desperately need communitarian (and perhaps convivialist) enrichment, but equally that communitarian and convivialist forms of life cannot do without the safeguards of liberal political and social principles.

There is no real news here, and doubtless convivialists think about it, but what do they think about it, and how particularly convivially do they deal with it? We would have liked to learn what convivialists say to

these sorts of concerns, which are old, pre-capitalist, pre-liberal, and may even turn out to be perennial.

Our reservation is not so much that the *Manifestos* are too normative, as Natalie Heinich (2020) suggests—Philip Selznick (1992), among others, has persuasively articulated the argument for a normatively oriented social science—or even that it expends too much effort weaving together philosophical and sociological concerns; Selznick encouraged that too (Krygier 2021). It is more that the *Manifestos*' sociology is not nearly as prominent as it should be. All the convivialist principles are entirely agreeable, and one could not argue with them. However, to the extent that they run counter to how the world actually works, beyond the pursuit of some worldview that will in itself address existing structures of power, domination, exploitation, oppression and violence, even the supposedly concrete policy proposals remain oddly normative rather than practical, strangely disconnected from the real word situations they are meant to be changing.

1. History Matters

And those situations were not born just yesterday. One of the effects of the weight placed in the *Manifestos* on seeking an *ideational glue* to counter neoliberalism, utilitarianism, and the hubristic tendency towards a limitless domination and exploitation of nature, and on developing a new political philosophy that has more chance of animating public opinion, is an almost total present-centeredness.

If a convivialist sensibility is to take wider root, partly in response to the convivialist exhortations, it is important to see and articulate the change being proposed as the latest stage in a long-term process. The energy-hungry and growth-oriented capitalist world we currently inhabit is the product of a variety of very long-term processes, beginning at least in 1450 (Moore 2016). A sense of the weight of history is essential to any attempts to transform the world as it currently exists. There are parts of the *Manifestos* that point in this direction, to the extent that it emphasizes that there already are *real existing* forms of conviviality, and

argues for placing them more at the forefront of how social life is understood and experienced, but how they came about is left unanalyzed.

Changes in moral orientation, habits, belief, norms, and values do not happen overnight. It is entirely possible that a convivialist disposition would constitute a return to earlier types of sensibilities and styles of moral orientation that neoliberal ideas and practices have pushed in different directions, but one cannot know that if one does not attend to the historical development of convivialist but also all the related concepts, such as courtesy, civility, civilization, or sociability. For convivialism to flourish, it will be important to understand and be able to explain the ways in which we are all located in process of convivializ*ation*, what earlier forms of conviviality looked and felt like, how they evolved and how a market-orientated utilitarian mindset pushed those types of convivialism aside—perhaps identifying processes of de-convivialization.

It is at this point—among others—that the work of Norbert Elias (2012 [1939]) on the civilizing process becomes important, and we are a little mystified as to why his arguments have not been taken up in the *Manifestos* and related writings. The problem of how to live together, despite intense competition and profound differences, with as little violence as possible, is exactly what lies at the heart of long-term transformation of human *habitus* and psychological disposition—closely tied precisely to changing forms of interdependence—that Elias termed the civilizing process. If, as Adloff (2020: 118) explains, "[c]onviviality requires minimal civil standards of nonviolence and tolerance of difference," there are many senses in which the concept *convivialism* is not a million miles away from *civilization*.

The history of convivialism also matters in relation to its intellectual origins, which are most often identified as lying in the conception of 19th century French gastro-philosopher Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, referring to the sociability of a relaxed meal shared with friends and family (ibid.: 160 f.). However, its appeal would be broadened if its roots were regarded as lying equally in its Spanish cognate, *conviviencia*, used by Spanish philologist and literary historian, Américo Castro to refer to a period in Spain's history (711–1492) when Christian, Muslim, and Jew-

ish groups were able to live together without massacring each other. *Conviviencia* has a complex and nuanced history of enormous relevance to how one might understand convivialism today. One of the more important observations has been that it has been possible to romanticize the ways that the different religious communities lived alongside each other, as if animated by a spirit of *conviviencia*, when in reality the driving forces were pragmatism, convenience, and the realities of existing power balances, ensuring that *conviviencia* dissolved like early morning mist as soon as those aspects of life shifted, giving us *inter alia* the expulsion of the Jews and the inquisition. As Kenneth Wolf (2009: 81) puts it, "[t]he 'tolerance' of medieval Spain was built […] not on any collective commitment to be more tolerant but on the pragmatic realities of day-to-day interaction in a world where people were forced by circumstance to cooperate with one another."

This means that as well as identifying the "institutional orders" that stand in the way of convivialism (Adloff 2020: 118), it is equally important to address the social structures and institutional arrangements that convivialism *requires*, something that would need to be added to the Manifestos' concentration on the pursuit of *ideational glue*. Currently the discussions of *conviviencia* and of convivialism run on two more or less parallel tracks with little reference to each other, with the exception of writers such as Costa (2019), Gutiérrez Rodríguez (2020) and Nowicka (2020). *Conviviencia*, as Gutiérrez Rodríguez (2020: 107) points out, was an important reference point for Ivan Illich's (1973) efforts to rethink how humans should live in the world, given that it "also has moral implications as it emphasizes a communal being in the world, one that is tied to a respectful and caring living together," precisely how the convivialism discussion aims to develop the original French conception of pleasurable shared dining.

2. There's More to Life than Marcel Mauss and the Gift Relationship

In our view the discussion of convivialism so far lacks a collaboration with closely related concepts, forms of analysis and lines of argument that engage with related concerns but all together would constitute a more compelling and persuasive intellectual position. Continuing relations of power and inequality are not ignored, but more attention does need to be paid to how they can continue to operate alongside and within convivialist social relations. Thus, for example, a sober exploration of the sources and significance of *mere civility* in a world of distrust, disgust, disrespect and intolerance might augment the realism of convivialist discussions (Bejan 2017).

Again, Marcel Mauss's (1966 [1925]) work on the gift relationship is indeed very rich and suggestive, and the way it can be connected to theories of recognition adds enormously to our understanding of human sociability. However, an awful lot of theoretical eggs are being placed in the one basket, and any account of the gift relationship surely needs to be placed in the context of all sorts of other types of relationship—of power, to begin with—requiring a much broader range of theoretical and empirical reference points. Just as an aside, we were puzzled by the absence of any discussion of one of the more important earlier introductions of Mauss's work, Richard Titmuss's 1970 book, *The Gift Relationship*, where he examined competing models—gift or market?—of how blood donation should be constituted, drawing out the implications for the structure of social policy more broadly. What is particularly important about Titmuss's account here is his emphasis on the uniqueness of blood donation as a type of gift: its anonymity and the impossibility of direct reciprocity make it a gift to *society* itself, and that, somehow, is where the counter-gift then needs to come from. This would constitute a very significant model for the kind of convivialism being pursued by the *Manifestos*.

Sérgio Costa (2019: 27) refers to the "normative bias in favor of 'good conviviality'" at the expense of a consequential engagement with how one person's convivialism can easily become another's experience of in-

equality and domination. Like civility, courtesy, and civilization, it is important to be alert to the possible *dark sides* of convivialism, harmful effects that far too often shadow the very best of intentions. The clue to understanding the logic and dynamics, for example, of the damage done by welfare interventions into Indigenous families in settler-colonial settings like Australia and Canada is to go beyond asking, "is it welfare or is it genocide?," to come to the realization that they were precisely both those things.

For Achille Mbembe (2001: 110) one can see in the postcolonial setting an "aesthetics of vulgarity" driven by a logic of conviviality, as opposed to one of opposition and resistance, that domesticates and renders familiar existing relations of power, "inscribing the dominant and the dominated within the same episteme." Mbembe observes that the postcolonial mode of exercising power involves not just control, but also conviviality—"the constant compromises, the small tokens of fealty, the inherent cautiousness"—constituting "the myriad ways ordinary people guide, deceive, and toy with power instead of confronting it directly" (ibid.: 128).

The *Manifestos*' "declaration of interdependence" appears to portray it as a state or human condition merely requiring acknowledgement, rather than as a dynamic process in which different groups of people become more or less interdependent in the context of shifting social, political, and economic structures. Frank Adloff (2020: 60 f.) correctly draws attention to the *Manifestos*' lack of acknowledgment of the analysis of interdependence between humans, non-human and objects in the Science and Technology Studies literature (Latour, Law, Callon, among others), but Norbert Elias also places shifting forms of interdependence, in particular the effects of ever-lengthening global chains of interdependence, at the center of his analysis of the civilizing process. The real issue is not *whether* humans are interdependent, but the ways in which we are, and how those forms of interdependence are shifting, for what reasons, and in relation to which other lines of development. Reference to Elias's work would also enable the *Manifestos* to recognize the need to balance becoming attuned to interdependence with the continuing desire for autonomy. As Elias (1995 [1986]: 36) put it, deepening interde-

pendencies "are accompanied with great regularity by specific tensions and conflicts. No group of people is pleased when it realizes that it is now more dependent on others than before."

Costa has also pointed out that the "relational" conception of human sociability lying at the heart of the *Manifestos* is not at all novel, and that there is a long line of relational sociology stretching back at least to Georg Simmel (who also, incidentally, outlined the sociological significance of the gift in 1908), but in particular to Elias, whose critique of the *homo clausus* conception of human identity and his concept of "figuration" has the potential to develop and strengthen the *Manifestos*' theoretical efforts to move beyond both methodological individualism and structural functionalism enormously. Two of the more central authors of the *Manifestos*, Caillé and Vandenberghe (2020), have elsewhere proposed a return to a general social theory as August Comte first proposed, but it was Elias (2012 [1978]) who argued in the 1970s for exactly this conception of sociology—at great cost to his reputation among German and British sociologists, it should be added, given the low opinion of Comte at the time. To the extent that convivialism rests on a particular way of being in the world as well as a world view, constituting an argument for anchored cultural practices in addition to social and political forms, the *Manifestos*' account would very much benefit both from Bourdieu's (1990 [1980]) sociology of *habitus* and from Elias's account of how and why *habitus* changes over time.

3. What Is the Question?

We would like to conclude by observing that for us what makes the *Manifestos* interesting and compelling is that they lie at the intersection point of many different lines of moral, sociological, and political arguments, and the possible connections between them hold considerable promise. Every aspect of the *Manifestos* that we wholeheartedly agree with in turn raises, we have to confess, an array of questions, often complaints about absences and omissions, and problems unresolved in the *Manifestos* themselves. However, there is now a rapidly expanding

literature on *real existing* convivialism, and *conviviencia*, that addresses different sorts of questions from the one lying at the heart of the *Manifestos*, engaging less with spelling out a world view, and more with the mutual constitution of world views and situated practical experiences. Documenting and learning from these widely varying experiences of the pursuit of convivialist principles and ideals promises to do a great deal towards achieving them.

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