

From Lived Convivialism to Convivialist Transformations

A Difficult Transition

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I met Alain Caillé for the first time in February 2014, on one of those bitterly cold mornings typical of late winter in Berlin. I picked him up at a hotel on Spittelmarkt, square in Eastern Berlin. Spittelmarkt is coincidentally the address that appears in the professional correspondence of Brazilian historian and sociologist Sérgio Buarque de Holanda when he lived in Berlin between 1929 and 1930 and worked on his classical book *Roots of Brazil*. Originally published in 1936, the book applied, probably for the first time in Latin America, the ideas of Max Weber to the study of modernization in the region.

These topographical coincidences permeated my thoughts throughout the exciting day of activities and conversations. The main reason we had invited Caillé was to participate in a lecture series on contemporary critiques of capitalism organized by a very good colleague and friend, Ina Kerner, who at that time was professor of political science at Humboldt Universität, and myself. The program combined a regular seminar, in which we discussed texts by our guests, and lectures, and attracted considerable attention; some 200 students enrolled and actively participated in the program that had been planned for no more than 40 participants.

Since Caillé had generously decided to spend a good part of the day with us before the evening lecture, we invited him to get to know initiatives in Berlin that could be identified with the ideals of convivial-

ism. The choice was not easy: the city has numerous cooperatives, self-managed cultural centers, post-migrant and post-feminist theatres and even an anarchist party that at that time had 15 representatives in the local parliament: Die Piraten (“The Pirates”). Driven by the campaign slogan “Teilen ist das neue Haben,” which translates roughly as “sharing is the new way to have,” the party attained 8.9 percent of the votes in Berlin in 2011. Conventional politics, however, does not seem to be compatible with the utopia of absolute transparency The Pirates were aiming for. In the next elections of 2016, the party won no more than 2 percent and lost its parliamentary representation without having left any significant contribution to local politics.

We decided to visit two projects that are quite different from each other, but which are equally illustrative of the promises of convivialism: the Initiative 100% Tempelhofer Feld and the ufaFabrik. The 100% Tempelhofer Feld is a civil initiative that was established to protect an area of 360 hectare located almost in the center of West Berlin where the Tempelhof Airport had operated until 2008. UfaFabrik, in its turn, builds on the name of a legendary film studio founded in the 1920s in south Berlin. Since 1979, the site of the studio has been home to the International Cultural Center ufaFabrik, a self-managed enterprise with around 30 residents and a few hundred other people involved in its activities.

We arrived at Tempelhof field early in the morning and were met by the organization’s spokesperson who toured part of the grounds of the old airport with us, presenting the importance of preserving the area in its entirety for ecological, landscape and convivial reasons. Shortly after the airport closed, the runways and adjoining areas were transformed into a vast park. The former landing, take-off and taxiing areas are now gigantic spaces used for cycling, skating, and sailing. The ‘vehicles’ range from skateboarders hanging from enormous kites and carts powered by sails to more sophisticated constructions on wheels, similar to kite-surfing equipment. The lawns are used for barbecues, improvised football matches or simply as a green beach during sunny summer days, when they are shared peacefully by traditionally dressed Muslim families and young people in beach clothes.

At the time of our visit, the 100% Tempelhofer Feld initiative was campaigning for a cause that seemed unattainable. They were trying to stop, by means of a referendum, the Berlin government's plan to build residential buildings on the edge of the airport site to make up for the housing shortage that has plagued the city. The 100% Tempelhofer Feld initiative, through donations and voluntary work by hundreds of residents, had managed to put together an incredible collection of data and experts' studies, showing the advantages of preserving 100 percent of the Tempelhof field as a park and recreation area. The campaign was difficult but executed with humor and gained important supporters such as the Green Party, which at the time distributed posters with a very unfavorable photo of the then municipal mayor, Klaus Wowereit, asking: "Would you entrust a second airport to this man?" The question mocked the fact that the mayor's main project, the construction of the Berlin-Brandenburg Airport, was promised first for October 2011 and then for June 2012, but due to numerous planning problems and construction errors, did not open until October 2020 and at a cost far higher than originally planned.

The referendum took place on 25 May 2014, together with the election to the European parliament. A large majority of Berlin voters across the city and not just in the areas surrounding the Tempelhof field decided that the park should be kept as it is, with no use of the land for housing construction. However, at the time of our visit, three months before the referendum, the spokesperson who received us seemed to be in a campaign mood. He professionally recited the script he had prepared to explain all the risks associated with the project to slice up the park. Caillé managed to ask a few questions and clarify his doubts while Ina and I just listened. Even so, in the end, if we had not become more excited about the initiative, it was because of the cold wind that pierced our several layers of clothes, prickling our skin and discouraging enthusiastic comments. From a purely argumentative point of view, we were fully convinced of the merits of the claim not to alter the current use of the Tempelhof field as a park. It is worth mentioning that, after our visit and the referendum that decided to keep the former airport as a recreational area, the 100% Tempelhofer Feld movement remained ac-

tive, seeking to participate in all processes involving the use of the area. Particularly important in the recent history of the site has been the use of the former airport as an emergency shelter for refugees during and after the so-called European refugee crisis of 2015. In this context, new initiatives have emerged and the 100% Tempelhofer Feld movement is now part of a network of civil associations and groups called *Wir sind THF!* (“We are THF!”) and which understands that citizen participation in defining the use of the Tempelhof field is part of a broader project to shape the future. In the words of the network:

“In the future, the quality of life of all people will crucially depend on how we deal with the challenges of our time. It can only be preserved if climate goals are achieved and democratic and solidarity-based structures are strengthened. This includes measures against discrimination against minorities as well as the successful and responsible integration of refugees and newcomers. Many citizens are concerned with the question of how we can achieve these goals in cities like Berlin and make them sustainable, people-friendly and resource-efficient: How do we make cities liveable places for *all* people?” (Christiani/Saddei/Hanske 2019; my translation)

While driving from the Tempelhof field to the ufaFabrik we exchanged our impressions on the initiative we had just visited. Ina and I also took the opportunity to try to resolve doubts that had arisen in our discussions on convivialism. The first and most obvious concerned the differences between convivialism and other emancipatory concepts such as communicative reason or even radical democracy. In a direct and convincing way, Alain Caillé showed us that convivialism shuns artificial divisions of work and interaction or system and lifeworld. To the contrary: because it permeates across all spheres of social life, convivialism does not recognize artificial cleavages between spaces of coexistence. According to Alain Caillé, a division between certain spaces where instrumental relations prevail, and other social spaces codified by a search for understanding would represent an unacceptable concession to utilitarianism.

Other issues that we briefly mentioned during our drive were more complicated and could not be resolved in the short trip of no more than 20 minutes between the Tempelhof field and the ufaFabrik, even if I, trying to gain more time for discussion, drove the car at the minimum speed allowed along the route. I am referring here, above all, to our doubts about the critical character of convivialism. We were not sure, for example, if convivialism and the anti-utilitarian theoretical matrix that inspires it offer instruments for a consistent critique of capitalism or even for an analysis of power asymmetries in terms of gender, ethnicity, or North–South disparities.

A bit reluctantly, but overwhelmed by the constraints of the agenda, we got out of car at the ufaFabrik's car park, postponing the instigating discussions until Caillé's evening lecture.

It was worth interrupting the theoretical conversation to observe the practical lesson in convivialism at the ufaFabrik. We were welcomed by one of the founders of the project, who since 1979, when the land was occupied, has been following every step of the successful initiative. Without too many adjectives or dramatic affirmations, the founder told us how the group of young people, half adventurers and half artists, who had previously worked together on various cultural initiatives in the district of Schöneberg, gradually settled in and adapted the old film studio to their needs. A permanent outdoor photo exhibition, installed at the entrance to the culture factory, documents and highlights colorful details that the founder, vigorously but in a discreet way, avoided in her account.

At first the members of the project combined all of their incomes. Everything they earned—from shows they staged, from the café, the wholegrain bread factory and, later, from the cinema, theatre, and workshops—were placed in a common fund that was distributed among the participants equally, regardless of the qualification or degree of sophistication of the work done. Even before internal conflicts could undermine the socialist utopias of the commune members, the municipal tax agency intervened. It demanded, in accordance with its Prussian convictions, clear criteria for taxation: if they did not say who did exactly what and how much they received per hour or per

month for the specific work done, it would consider everyone to be tax evaders.

The participants in the project have been adapting both to peculiarities of tax legislation and to changes in family situations, as daughters and sons born in the commune questioned the rules concerning living together without formal boundaries. At the same time, negotiations with the municipal government succeeded and the risk of eviction from the land was at least temporarily overcome. Today, the members of the project have a free-lease agreement with the municipality and make intensive use of every millimeter of the almost 20,000 square meters of land: besides the gastronomic and cultural activities, which include the Terra Brasilis Berlin samba group and a children's circus, they run a mini-farm with animals for children and produce most of the energy they consume with a windmill and solar panels. In general, they remain faithful to their founding principle, which they present in a very convincing and coherent way:

“Approximately 30 residents and over 180 employees come together to live, work, and share their cultural, creative, and social lifestyle with one another. Internationality, sustainability, self-reliance, and self-realization have always been the ideals of *ufaFabrik*, and the way in which members not only approach each other, but their neighbors as well—since long before ‘work-life balance’, ‘networking’, and ‘sustainability’ were the hot cultural buzzwords.” (ufaFabrik 2021)

Throughout the visit, an ideological affinity became clear between Alain Caillé, who we encouraged to comment on the notion of convivialism, and the founder of *ufaFabrik*, whose nearly 40-year experience of lived convivialism seemed inscribed in each of her gestures and accounts. All four of us were clearly disappointed when we realized the late hour and the need to suddenly interrupt the conversation and the visit.

On the way from the *ufaFabrik* to the hotel, there was no time to return to the engrossing discussions on capitalism and power. We digested the impressions of the visit in unsystematic yet fortunately complementary sentences. The fascination with the project and

for that strong woman with unshakeable convictions dominated the atmosphere.

Although we did not address the themes directly, expectations began to build about Caillé's talk and the evening's discussion. Our keynote speaker did not disappoint us. He came very well prepared and equipped for the lecture in an enormous auditorium on the ground floor at the corner of Universitätsstraße and Georgenstraße, with monumental windows revealing passers-by in that part of the city with a rich history. In a clear and fluent presentation, without directly reading from his notes, Caillé spoke for 50 minutes about convivialism, the political context of its emergence, its main theoretical references, and the consequences that he personally drew from the first *Convivialist Manifesto* of 2013 (English edition: 2014 [hereafter cited as: *FCM*]) and the social movement around it.

We opened the discussion. Participants returned to questions raised in the previous session, when we had discussed, in addition to the 2013 *FCM*, texts from a compilation in German of works by Caillé (2008). The questionings focused on two points. The first point can be summarized as a certain skepticism about the possibility of treating convivialism as a critique of capitalism. That is, the participants claimed that convivialism proposed a world different from the one we live in but without offering a clear diagnosis of the reasons why the world we live in is the way it is. The second point stemmed from the first and concerned the implausibility of a convivialist future. The participants claimed that the project was, at heart, voluntarist, affirming that convivialists seem to believe that socio-economic inequalities and power asymmetries would disappear if humanity so wished. In contrast to this voluntarist version of social change, the participants affirmed that the goal of transforming or even overcoming capitalism cannot be guided by an anti-utilitarian rationality, to the contrary: it requires a coherent project and clear strategies for transformation.

Caillé responded with precision, care, and profound intellectual generosity to each of the questions posed. Ina and I added a few more considerations, but our main points on capitalism and the analysis of power had already been contemplated by the students. From what

we added, it is worth highlighting, perhaps, the questioning of the elective affinities between convivialism and other related terms such as conviviality, coined by Ivan Illich (1973) in *Tools for Conviviality* or “convivial cultures,” as used by Paul Gilroy (2005) in his book *Postcolonial Melancholia*. Without ruling out possible similarities, Caillé emphasized the importance of maintaining the term convivialism as a noun, to avoid derivations such as conviviality, to ensure the comprehensive character of the proposal and its quality as a movement.

At the end of the public discussion, Caillé commented to us, in a tone both resigned and ironic, that the participants were still too young to understand convivialism. The comment puzzled us. It left us with the impression that the advance of convivialism can only be understood as a mature transformation, above and beyond revolutionary outbursts.

Seven years after that visit which had such an impact on us, and when considering the notes above written for the launch of the Brazilian translation of the *FCM*, some of the central questions we discussed on that occasion remain unanswered—even after the publication of the *Second Convivialist Manifesto* (Convivialist International 2020). The most pressing question is one our students raised in 2014: What is the transformative power of convivialism? Is it really possible to transform dominant ways of life without a radical critique of capitalism? The environmentalist and anti-consumerist critique of capitalism inscribed in convivialism seems to be too weak to confront digital and financial capitalism. That is, contemporary financial capitalism has promoted a concentration of wealth and income that exponentially increases the inequalities produced by industrial capitalism. And this happens in the context of the so-called uberization of work in which labor guarantees are suspended and workers have been stylized as small entrepreneurs, responsible for all the risks as service providers for transnational corporations. It seems, that the quotidian convivial oases justifiably celebrated by convivialists do not have the power to contain and change the old and new forms of super-exploitation imposed by 21st century capitalism.

Another concern that grows with the expansion of the convivialist movement beyond European borders refers to convivialism’s capacity

to articulate the multiple demands for better material living conditions in the global South. Emerged in societies with solid welfare states, convivialism seems to focus more on the symbolic dimension of sociability. The material dimension of social life is still underdeveloped in the convivialist proposal. To connect with social struggles in the global South, the convivialist movement needs a clear project of income and wealth redistribution, both within national states and from the global North to the global South. Mere declarations of intent are not enough. Proposals for tax reforms and the creation of compulsory transfer mechanisms from the richest to the poorest are necessary.

In presenting these doubts and questions, I am obviously not trying to diminish the transformative power of convivialism. The capacity of self-managed actions and initiatives to transform power relations and re-shape forms of living together at the local level is indisputable, as the examples of *ufaFabrik* and the 100% *Tempelhofer Feld* unequivocally testify. The difficulty, however, is one of scale. How is it possible to move from local convivial spaces to planetary convivialism, from convivialism as lived experience at the local level to an encompassing convivialist transformation? How can single initiatives leverage the necessary reversal of the social inequalities produced and reproduced every day and in all spheres of global capitalism? Actually, at least some actors within the convivialist movement have seriously addressed these questions in their effort to enact the desirable social transformations that convivialism has envisioned and inspired. Accordingly, we have recently observed the emergence of various networks including convivialist initiatives in Europe and analogous movements in different world regions, especially Latin America. These new alliances contribute to expanding the social and cultural repertoires of convivialism and to interconnect a variety of local experiences which use different concepts and instruments in their struggles to develop better ways of living together. In the same vein, the current campaign to establish a Planetary Citizen Assembly also points to the limits of conventional politics, focused and confined to national states, for promoting encompassing transformations. We can only hope that these types of initiatives proliferate and

are able to articulate local experiences of lived convivialism as driving forces of structural transformations.

Literature

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