

# The First Convivialist Steps

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*Gustave Massiah*

In 2002, Stéphane Hessel published *Dix Pas dans le nouveau siècle* (“Ten Steps into the New Century”) in which he asked ten authors to put forward their proposals for the 21st century. Twenty years later, we can measure the extent to which unprecedented upheavals coexist with daunting permanencies. It is therefore not a question of describing an ideal and coherent world but of taking into account what can evolve through contradictions. And more precisely, it is a question of choosing the first steps, bearing in mind the thought of Lao Tzu: “A journey of a thousand miles always begins with a single step.”

The pandemic and the climate crisis are creating a rupture with the past and opening up a new era. One that will be difficult and contradictory. It will begin with a period of confrontation on economic, social, ecological, political, democratic, and cultural issues. But we can point to some opportunities that could strengthen and renew convivialist proposals.

To appreciate the possibilities for the future, we must start from this new world that is emerging, still finding its way, and resisting conservatism and reactionism. To do this, we can begin with the movements that are leading to emancipation. Among these movements are those to advance women's rights, to solve the ecological crisis, to rein in digital technology and biotechnology, to defend migrants' rights, to protect indigenous peoples, to continue the ongoing process of decolonization, and to reject racism. Each of these movements provokes violent reactions from some corners of society. Their proposals offer new pathways to inspire convivialism.

## 1. Transitions

In this contradictory period of a world under reconstruction, there are advances that have been made, changes that have been initiated, and avenues that remain open. We assume that in each of the areas of transition, the period to come will see some changes being made while others will still be seeking their path or are only just being sketched out.

### Interdependence

Despite the confinement and isolation that we have experienced during the pandemic, what is needed is an awareness of interdependence, of the fact that we depend on each other. There have been new reflections on the meaning of work, on useful work, on essential activities. Health policy is no longer subordinate to economic activity and production. Caregivers and hospitals have raised awareness of the paradigm and philosophy of care. This paradigm concerns humans but it can also be extended to nature, as Enzo Traverso points out. These are openings that, despite the resistance they provoke, initiate the advance towards a convivialist outlook.

### A Passion for Equality and Freedom

The challenge to the cultural hegemony of neoliberalism was based on the rejection of inequality and discrimination in all its forms. The passion for equality has not been directed towards egalitarianism. The quest for equality reinforces the defense and deepening of individual and collective freedoms and solidarity. New concepts have emerged in relation to individual property and the monopoly of the economy, to the predominance of corporations, to sacralized consumption. New notions are emerging: common goods, *buen vivir* (“living well/good living”), social and collective property, the democratization of democracy.

## Equal Access to Fundamental Rights

The other realization concerns the limits of the market, and particularly of the global market, in terms of its ability to regulate economies and societies. An awareness of such limits should call into question the hegemonic role of neoliberal globalization and the capitalist market in determining activities and organizing the world. What is advancing are claims to fundamental rights and equal access to these rights. The main contours of a convivialist policy are thus beginning to emerge: access to the right to healthcare, to income, to work, to housing and territory, to education, to culture. And also, the right to environmental protection. These rights are expressed at different levels, from local to global. It is the public services—local and territorial, national, and global public services—that enable access to rights. Convivialism can emphasize global public goods and propose to organize global public services.

## The Ecological and Climate Crisis

The awareness of the ecological crisis, now that it has exposed the limits of productivist growth, has profoundly modified the very notion of the economy. It has confirmed and modified the perception and centrality of the social question toward the need to combine the social dimension and the ecological dimension. The rejection of productivist growth has transformed the forms of production, starting with energy and transport, and facilitated solidarity-based localization, emphasizing ecology and territorial autonomy starting at the local level. This awareness has led to reconsidering the traditional approach to the domination of nature by humankind, abandoning the notion of infinite time, and reflecting on the limits of human dominance. Society has remembered the role of the pandemic and the climate in the fall of the Roman Empire. The collapse of a civilization opens up long and contradictory periods of transition. New values and new social relationships develop over time. What some people today call collapse can also be a period of emergence of a new civilization. It is not the end of the world.

## From Local to Global

Where can convivialism lead us in organizing the world? It is a question of redefining the interrelations between scales, from local to global. The pandemic and the climate have shown that the main problems facing humanity are global ones. And yet the responses have been provided at the national level, by the states. Overcoming this situation requires initiating new articulation across territorial scales. The local level will become the starting point, and communalism will link the territories, the populations with all their diversity, and the local institutions. According to Miguel Torga's (1986; my translation) beautiful formula, "the universal is the local minus the walls." The right to the city becomes a right to the territory that links the rural and the urban. The balance of territories replaces metropolization.

The national level remains a frame of reference. It links history, cultures, and territories. But identity cannot be reduced to national identity; Edouard Glissant and Patrick Chamoiseau's proposal of multiple identities, which are the result of diversity and express the singularity of each person, must be implemented. Unity builds on respect for multiple identities.

Geopolitics will have been recomposed. After a period of displacement of the centre of the world towards the Pacific, the rise in power of Asia and then Africa will have rebalanced the power dynamics between the continents and contributed to facilitating the transition towards a multipolarity that leaves room for balance and equality in the relations between countries. The large geo-cultural regions are spaces of environmental and of geopolitical balances. The sixteen geo-cultural regions will provide the cultural and political support for the international arena: the three Asias, the four Africas and the Middle East, the four Americas and the Caribbean, the four Europeans and Oceania. Globalization will be giving way to globality. The planetary dimension will be making itself felt. The United Nations will be responsible for ensuring the prohibition of wars and arms control. It will be profoundly renewed with two chambers, one in which the states are represented, the other formed from a representation of the peoples of the world.

## The democratic imperative

The democratic issue is the most central and the most difficult. It is a question of linking local democracy, national democracy, and global democracy. Three major advances will be made. The first advance is based on the rejection of the corruption that undermines democracy and is the reason for the rejection of politics. It involves breaking the fusion between the political class and the financial class, which undermines politics and results in the mistrust of all citizens towards politicians and politics. Progress towards a balance of power between politics and economics is a priority. An international tax system must do away with tax havens and allow for the establishment of balanced, non-competitive tax regimes. The second step forward is a cultural one. It concerns the redesign of politics based on the refusal of young people to accept traditional forms of representation and delegation. It is about how to combine direct democracy and representative democracy. The third advance is the complete rejection of racism and discrimination. The awareness of the importance and presence of colonization, slavery, and caste systems shows that they prevent the recognition of diversity and the unity of societies necessary for democracy. This implies a long road of constructing the necessary decoloniality for the invention of new forms of democracy.

## 2. The Convivialist Utopia

Having explored the opportunities that seed convivialism, how do we address the specific changes that convivialism proposes? To move beyond the first steps, we need to resort to a little utopia. Let us project ourselves into a desirable future.

What convivialism proposes is to go beyond hubris, excess, the endless addiction to the appropriation of ever more wealth and the control of ever more power. How can we build a new world without a radical change of mentality, without the discovery of new ways of living together?

Let us imagine that research has shown that hubris is a contagious disease. Not everyone can be cured of it, but everyone can be affected by it. For the addiction to wealth, the cure is a matter of fighting inequality. A general minimum income has been introduced, and the different countries have embarked on a path toward convergence based on a shared global tax system. Taxation is now based on raw materials and greenhouse gas emissions and ecological degradation, particularly climatic. The disappearance of tax havens and the control of banking systems has made it possible to establish equitable taxation. The reference point for this is the marginal tax rates for very high incomes that had been in place from 1933 until 1980. As for addiction to power, a law has prohibited those suffering from the most acute forms of hubris to exercise any form of executive authority.

Other forms of recognition have made their way without falling into mandatory or conspicuous humility. Excellence has not been reserved for individual competition. The emphasis has shifted from praising the best individual to praising the best team. The criterion of success has not been the biggest asset for shareholders, entrepreneurs, sportsmen, or singers. Culture and sport reject elitism and degradation. We have learned to separate success and risk-taking from possession. The commons have made it possible to reinvent forms of ownership based on social property and the public good. Public action has been differentiated from forms of private commerce and state control.

The new cultures have made it possible to overcome uniformity via a diversity of paths. Society or rather societies have learned to value diversity. The balance sought between the individual and the collective has made it possible to find the proper relation between individual freedoms and collective projects. The path is that of democracy, of its constant exploration and (re)invention. In his *Discourse on colonialism*, Césaire (1955 [1950]: 19; my translation) wrote in relation to colonization and the claim of Western superiority: “I systematically praise our old black *civilizations*: they were *courteous civilizations*.” This was in contrast to brutal civilizations built on force and humiliation. The search for convivial forms is the way to a new courteous civilization. Convivialism is the antidote to *hubris*.

## Literature

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