Right Here, Right Now
The Art of Living Together

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In the beginning when the word was spoken,
in the beginning when the fire was lighted,
in the beginning when the house was built,
we were among you.
Silent, like a word not spoken,
dark, like a fire not lighted,
formless, like a house not built,
we were among you:
the sold woman,
the enslaved enemy.
We were among you, coming closer,
coming closer to the world.
In your time when all the words were written,
in your time when everything was fuel,
in your time when houses hid the ground,
we were among you.
Quiet, like a word whispered,
dim, like a coal under ashes,
insubstantial, like the idea of a house,
we were among you:
the hungry,
the powerless,
in your world, coming closer,
coming closer to our world.

In the ending when the words were forgotten,
in the ending when the fires burned down,
in the ending when the walls fell down,
we were among you:
the children,
your children,
dying your dying to come closer,
to come into our world, to be born.
We were the sands on your sea-coasts,
the stones of your hearths. You did not know us.
We were the words you had no language for.
O our fathers and mothers!
We were always your children.
From the beginning, from the beginning,
we are your children.
(Ursula K. Le Guin, Always Coming Home)

1. Discarding Convivial Futures

There is no such thing as a *convivial future*. A convivial future is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. Conviviality is not about linearity and progress, not about planning and designing a better world for the day after tomorrow; not about aiming at an allegedly better future at the expense of a good here and now; not about drafting blueprints for ideal societies that could be applied in any given context, at any given time, at any given place. On the contrary, *conviviality* refers to a specific kind of lived togetherness that is shared between all the human and non-human inhabitants of a specific place in time: not anywhere, anytime—but right here, right now! Conviviality challenges the very concept of future itself. Paradoxically, as we will argue, it is exactly by abandoning abstract notions of 'the future,' of 'universality,' of humans as 'self-reliant rational beings' and other modes of anthropocentric and utopist thinking that future beings may once be able to lead decent, convivial lives on our home planet and at its countless "centers of the world," as Ursula

K. Le Guin (1989: 82) called localities that are "known and named," that are "not a goal, not a place to get to, but a place where one is."

In the following reflections, we will orbit around ways of envisioning and realizing convivial forms of living here and now as worthy ancestors-to-be for our children—those living and those yet to be born—and our fellow beings. In doing so, we will draw upon ideas formulated by two ancestral accomplices, Ursula K. Le Guin and Ivan Illich.

2. Hidden Premises of Mistrust

Ivan Illich (1973: 11) defined conviviality half a century ago as follows:

> "I intend it to mean autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment; and this in contrast with the conditioned response of persons to the demands made upon them by others, and by man-made environment. I consider conviviality to be individual freedom realized in personal interdependence and, as such, an intrinsic ethical value."

The editors of this volume aim at collecting "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" (see Adloff/Caillé in this volume). What could such a world look like? We suggest that such a world will have to be one, in which many worlds fit, as the Zapatistas famously stated. Envisioning such a *pluriverse* will require ways of thinking that are radically different from those Western political theory has applied for centuries. The goal formulated above as well as convivialist thinking in general could easily be misunderstood as striving for a new kind of world society, as described in the all too familiar contract theories laid down by educated white men, such as Thomas Hobbes or John Rawls three centuries or eight decades ago, respectively. These theories basically state that we were able to find an ideal mode of organizing the world by collectively constructing the blueprint for an

ideal society under a 'veil of ignorance.' All human beings—that is the idea—should discuss together which society would be best, given that nobody knows which geographical and social place they would inhabit in such a world. According to Hobbes and Rawls these are the conditions for ensuring a just and equal society.

However, these ideas of society as a contract are diametrically opposed to convivialism. Contract theories rely upon many hidden premises, starting with the notion that people might want to organize themselves by means of contracts. Contracts are very special forms of conceptual artefacts that have evolved around trade activities since the times of ancient Mesopotamia some six millennia ago and, by their very nature, depend on written letters. As anthropologist Marshall Sahlins (1972 [1965]: 191) pointed out, *trade* is a human interaction that occurs between strangers who mistrust each other, whereas in contexts of kin, clan, or friendship completely different forms of distributing and pooling goods and services will be used. Current research on commoning as means of social organization confirms this insight (Helfrich/Bollier 2019).

Something very similar applies to the concept of *contract*: a contract is something to ensure that a given fact negotiated between the parties involved might go on 'forever,' that is, as long as the institutions legitimizing a contract exist, namely a state, a legislative apparatus, and a police force. As David Graeber (2011) showed in *Debt*, his social history of structural economic bondage in Western societies, contracts are predominantly written constructs between people who do not know and who mistrust each other, they are the very foundation of any state bureaucracy's "[u]topia of [r]ules" (Graeber 2015). On a grander level, the social interactions between people who do not know and who mistrust each other have been organized by the large-scale contractual agreements known as *states*. As anthropologist James C. Scott (1998; 2009) argued, statecraft as such is intrinsically intertwined with oppression and structural violence, as any state-making project first needs to make *legible* its subjects. This act of making living people legible as if they were abstract letters or numbers is necessarily connected to social stratification, levelling down, normalization, and, consequently, othering. Any

norm is meaningful only insofar as it can be delineated from all the many 'others' who do not comply to the norm. Declaring, for instance, white, male, rationalist, self-interested state subjects to be the norm will create multitudes of 'others' failing to meet this standard.

How, then, can we refer to those other forms of interaction between people who know and trust each other? Looking for a term for "non-market related" activities that "by their very nature escape bureaucratic control," Ivan Illich (1981: 44) suggested to recover the word "vernacular" (from Latin *vernaculum*, referring to "rootedness" and "abode"), designating "whatever was homebred, homespun, homegrown, homemade, as opposed to what was obtained in formal exchange" (ibid.: 57). Bearing in mind that that which is convivial tends to be place-centered and vernacular, we move on with examining another hidden premise.

A contract, as the hidden premise has it, is concluded between allegedly autonomous individuals whose actions are based on rational decision-making and who are accountable to none—neither to clan or kinship nor to human ancestors or the "more-than-human world" (Abram 1997). The contracting persons are de facto modelled in the image of that decrepit chimaera of *homo economicus*: as boundlessly floating individuals who are committed to nothing else but their well understood self-interests. The very idea that all we had to do now was finding a new social contract ensuring that human beings lived together peacefully on a permanent basis without exploiting their fellow beings is bound to come to nothing. For this idea misconstrues the fact that the concept of society-as-a-contract is intrinsically intertwined with the very same imperial lifestyles that it seeks to overcome in the first place.

3. Living Together Artistically rather than Contractually

Fortunately, conviviality points towards a completely different direction: conviviality is a mode of being between people—human or non-human—, that can neither be fixed in juridical codes nor made litigable. This is the core difference between conviviality and contractual agreements made to ensure social justice, equal distribution, and eth-

nic or gender equality. This is not at all to imply that convivial societies were unjust or unequal—but in convivial societies, justice and equality are based on interconnected, embedded, and context-bound direct social interactions between the people concerned; whereas many contemporary movements for justice and equality are based on the hidden premise of contractual agreements, for example, that universal rights are to be formulated for a global society in the manner of social contracts to be enforced by the agents of structural and physical violence: bureaucracies, judiciary apparatuses, and the police force. Conviviality, however, is not a contract but an art—the "art of living together [*convivere*]," as spelled out in the *Second Convivialist Manifesto* (Convivialist International 2020 [hereafter cited as: *SCM*]: 1 and 7).

Therefore, when deepening the question what a convivial society would look like, the term *conviviality* itself forces us to be very *radical* ("going to the roots"). It urges us to thoroughly consider what a place would look like where living together is an art rather than a contractual agreement. Central elements of living together in this way include talking to each other, telling stories following the oral tradition, playing music, performing rituals, caring for oneself and for the multiple others—be they humans, plants, animals, microbes, rivers, forests, mountains, landscapes, etc. As suggested above, this lifestyle bears on a deep level of commitment and dedication towards a place in time, a center of the world, including all of its inhabitants—instead of being forced by means of bureaucracy to adhere to lifestyles that compel us by their very structure to exploit and harm our fellow beings, often without even noticing it.

The *art* of living together cannot be plotted, pigeonholed, or made legible in a plan, a scheme, or a blueprint, designating isolated bureaucratic sectors, such as *mobility*, *education*, *social welfare*, *environmental protection*, *distributional justice*, etc. Trying to draw up an education scheme for the year 2050, for instance, is likely to end up in projecting the present onto the canvas of an unknown future—a projection that is bound to be either quite boring, lackluster, and dreary or else exceedingly lofty, ungrounded, and speculative. In any event, such projections of the present onto the future will be based on some of the very same

hidden premises that we need to get rid of in order to open the pathway to artistic creation.

Art is inherently interwoven with the notion of culture. Understood in an anthropological sense, culture is the ensemble of rites, norms, and practices that people adhere to at a certain place at a certain time in a certain way that they consider to be common-sense. Culture is a carpet woven jointly by the—ancestral, living, or yet unborn—people of a specific place at a specific time. It is simply not possible to fabricate such a carpet elsewhere or elsewhen and then impose it as a readymade blueprint upon people regardless of their specificity—any attempt to do so has ended up in colonialist, fascist, or other totalitarian forms. Culture simply cannot be woven, unless it is embedded in a *known and named* place and given all the time it needs to unfold its specificity and potentiality. This place-bound approach is closely connected to the term "heterotopia" coined by Michel Foucault (1989 [1984]) to designate a place in time that is alternative insofar as it subverts the ways and rules of normalist mainstream society.

Another hint at the place-centered nature of *culture* lies in the term itself, which is derived from Latin *cultivare* ("tending the soil"). Therefore, by its very essence, culture is intrinsically intertwined with the soil that we tread and feed upon and that we all will return to at the end of our lives, with our physical bodies becoming compost nourishing the plants growing on specific plots of land and our ideas and thoughts becoming threads for the cultural weaving patterns that may evolve into our children's future. People living in such a "becoming-compost" way are aware of the ever changing, non-linear, collaborative, and interdependent multitude that is life on, in, and through earth. Similarly, in her speculative fabulations *Staying with the Trouble*, Donna Haraway (2016) referred to people as "compostists."

This place-centered, becoming-compost attitude is not to be confused with blood-and-soil ideologies. Firstly, acknowledging the complexly immersive process of becoming-compost is completely contrary to any concept of soil as something *static*, *closed*, and *pure*. Secondly, places of conviviality inhabited by people who are embedded in a rich web of interconnected relational structures tend to embrace diversity,

inclusiveness, and ambiguity. Ivan Illich's ethical credo "individual freedom realized in personal interdependence" mentioned above forecloses segregating, cruel, or xenophobic ideologies. However, openness, diversity, and hospitality are qualities that have to be constantly tended, cared for, and renewed.

What is more, this unfolding art of living together is something completely different altogether than the search for a *utopia*—an ideal society that in a carrot-and-stick fashion promises to always be looming just beyond the horizon. A utopia (from Greek *ou*, "not," and *tópos*, "place," literally: "non-place") is something that by definition cannot be reached, cannot be located, situated, or grounded, and, by implication, can be applied to any place and no place at all—it is a fool's paradise, a cloud-cuckoo-land, a neverwhere, an abstract ideal, a promise made of very thin air. And yet, it is utopian thinking turning into universalist blueprints that has been at the core of much of Western concepts of progress. Certainly, there is nothing wrong with trying to imagine that which is not here yet—if it were, we would not have seen, for instance, votes for women or the end of slavery—however, things tend to get terribly messy when blueprints of lifestyles taken by some to be good, true, and universal are imposed upon others, regardless of who, where, and when they are.

4. Principles, Patterns, Practices

Let us turn again to the art of conviviality. How, then, can we cultivate at a concrete place in time ways of artfully living together? Where do people cultivate the art of becoming-compost? Can we identify patterns in such jointly woven carpets that may tell us stories about the art of conviviality?

In the *SCM* (7), the following principles of conviviality are spelled out:

> "The only legitimate policies, but also the only acceptable ethics, are those based on the following five principles: common naturality, com-

> mon humanity, common sociality, legitimate individuation, creative opposition. These five principles are subordinate to the absolute imperative of hubris control."

This sounds plausible enough. But where do we go from these principles? Are they meant to be the building blocks of yet another social contract, this time for a world society? Or could they be used to form a matrix, a fertile ground, from which patterns informing the art of living together in a becoming-compost sense may sprout?

What is actually the difference between principles and patterns? Whereas a *principle* is a normative guideline for behavior or evaluation, a *pattern* is—like a motive in a carpet—a certain cultural element, which people get inspired by, which they may copy, adapt, and alter according to their respective needs and to their carpets' fabrics. Patterns are not invented but are rather identified, recovered, or mined from phenomenological perception. Patterns do not say what ideal people in an ideal world *ought* to do but rather describe what actual people living at an actual place actually *do* (Alexander 1979). By placing the focus on the ways people organize their lives intrinsically, if they are not prevented from doing so by structures imposed upon them, the practice of finding such patterns subverts the prevalent structures of normalized mainstream and has even visionary potential: it makes us see the potentiality of that which is right here, right now, if only we allow for it to unfold. Drawing upon design thinker Christopher Alexander, commons activists Silke Helfrich and David Bollier (2019) developed the groundwork for a pattern language of commoning. The ways in which patterns are incorporated at a given locality vary from place to place, and so do the rules and regulations necessary to organize a given commons—they are not deducted from abstract universalist norms, values, and ideals but are embedded into regional and social contexts that are vernacular, place-centered, and highly idiosyncratic. As Nobel laureate and commons researcher Elinor Ostrom (2010) famously pointed out: when it comes to organizing commons, "[t]here are no panaceas!"

The units of organization structuring life at places of conviviality tend to be much smaller than many current administrative and bureau-

cratic units. So what about scalability? The very question whether convivial principles, patterns, and practices emerging from a specific place in time could be applied to other places or units of a larger scale is a categorial mistake and is itself a sign of utopist universalism. What developed at one place may not at all be compatible with another place. However, *heterotopias* will connect with each other to form non-hierarchical, polycentric webworks of idiosyncratic places. They will do so inevitably because human beings are always part of multiple intersecting groups—be they kinship, friendship, love relationships, care relationships, working collectives, etc. A more telling question to be asked would, therefore, be: what are the links, intersections, and common features connecting places of conviviality and what kind of structural and protective features allow for these connections to spread, flourish, and intensify?

But is all that not overly naive? What use is there in people practicing the art of living together and becoming-compost, if the rules of mainstream society and economy urge them to work towards monetary profits, to pay taxes, and to exploit other beings while being part of a world-eating civilizational paradigm? Our intervention is meant as a challenge to the widespread assumption that utopist thinking, which, as we showed, is based on hidden premises, such as universalism, abstraction, rationalism, and linearity, would pave the way towards a better future. If we are to envision a good life for all rather than just keep on replicating the very structures we are trying to overcome, then we need to begin at a different starting point altogether. This is not to say that in the light of existing nation states, international treaties, and a globalized economy it would not be worth fighting on a national and international level for more social justice, more gender equality, or laws protecting human rights and the environment. On the contrary, demonstrating against racist police action and occupying hotspots of financial speculation, nuclear power plants, airport runways, pipelines, or forests scheduled for logging is important! And so is lobbying with social movements and NGOs to alter legislative frameworks in order to end racist, sexist, and anthropocentric oppression.

Although this kind of *compassionate activism* is something quite different from unfolding the art of living together in a becoming-compost fashion both activities are nourished by similar qualities of place-centered embeddedness, vernacular resistance, and kindred connectedness to our fellow beings. Is it possible, however, for a single human being to do both: fighting against oppression and setting up alternative structures of conviviality? Firstly, fighting oppression is not a task a single human being could ever live up to—it takes generations of millions of people. Secondly, interestingly enough, the very places where oppression is fought—be it climate camps, tree sittings at Hambach Forest, or protests at Standing Rock—are often organized as heterotopias. The very action of standing with a tree and protecting it from being cut down to give way to yet another highway may assist human beings in reconnecting to some wider understanding of the way that our breathing mammal bodies are deeply embedded into concrete places and "the web of life" (Moore 2015) itself—nothing else is meant by *conviviality*!

But what about the future? Can we really afford not to work towards a better future in the light of climate crisis, species extinction, and exacerbating social injustice? And if so, what would be the alternative? We will give a tentative answer by resorting to the convivial practice of storytelling. One night, sitting at a campfire, social anthropologist and subsistence researcher Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen (for her general perspective, see Bennholdt-Thomsen/Mies 2000) told us the following anecdote: while she was doing field research in the Bolivian Andes, a woman from an indigenous community told her: "You Western people are always chasing after a good future. For us it's completely different! We know that our present will turn into our children's past. That's why we make sure to create a good present so that one day we will have a good past that we may cherish together with our children!"

Ursula K. Le Guin (2019 [1985]) even went a step further. Her opus magnum, *Always Coming Home*, giving detailed insights into the convivial styles and manners of a fictitious indigenous people living in a future version of Northern California includes a poem in which the children of the future address us, the people of the present: in an act of turned around intergenerational welfare they console us and encour-

age us to sow today the seeds from which one day their own convivial present may sprout. In order to do so, we need to be receptive to the shades and shadows that desirable futures may cast here and now instead of trying to cook up, scheme, and construct a purportedly better future in the name of those coming after us, while wrecking the very basis of human life on our planet. This makes all the more sense given the fact that time is perceived as cyclical rather than linear in many indigenous cultures. With this in mind, we kindly invite you to turn back to the beginning: "*In the beginning when the word was spoken …*"

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