

Conviviality: A Choice of Civilisation

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My presentation is relevant to all people who are searching for an alternative to the present way with which our world is managed. It draws upon the diagnosis posed by Ivan Illich in 1973. According to him a radical move is necessary. People must choose convivial tools if they want to avoid being crushed by machines and to save their freedom and their dignity. I will try to present the characteristics of these convivial tools as they are described in the convivialist Manifesto. This Manifesto brings four basic ethical and political principles, on which we must organize our societies in line with Illich's argument. These principles are not new, they are drawn from doctrines, religions and philosophies in so far as their recommendations made possible, and helped to improve, a sustainable life altogether (cum-vivere). It is necessary to go on with a strong intellectual promotion of these ideas to have a chance to escape from the looming threats on humanity.

1. Introduction

This paper presents an analysis that has been elaborated collectively to bring an alternative way of thinking, to break with the mainstream strand of thought. The reason is that we share, with so many people on earth, a discontentment regarding the way the leaders are trying to deal with the challenges that are in front of us. Their sole idea is to restore old ways of doing things. Thus they push relentlessly to come back to "business as usual". We are a growing number to want a more relevant answer to these challenges which are actually asking fundamental questions. **How do we want to live and how can we set up a new way of living?**

I want to convey three basic messages about that^a. First, I would like to make explicit why we have to address this question “how do we want to live?” Clearly, a lot of people are fed up with the way they have been living (or surviving) for long. In a nutshell, the human civilization, that is *the total culture and way of life*^b of human beings, is at stake because it has been almost exclusively focussed on a rationalistic search for economic and technical excellence, whereas this axis of evolution has reached a dead end.

My second message delivers what the core of the convivialist manifesto is: a set of general principles allowing a bearable life for all of us and for the future generations. Doing this, the Manifesto brings some first ideas about rules of organisation that a society should adopt to set up a mode of working complying with these principles. The target is to define the rules on which a society must work so that conviviality prevails. In other words, the Manifesto proposes a set of principles which are a basis to make a choice for a different civilization to build.

Finally, I will try to convince the reader that we have to take stock of the radicalism of the necessary move. It means that a series of small incremental changes will not switch us from this world to a better one. Even if the myriadization of such tiny changes could make us close to a radical move, a real upheaval is necessary to escape from the looming catastrophes. This is a choice of civilisation.

2. The human civilization at stake

For a few decades the forces of life have had to confront a steamroller of technical and economic efficiency. The operators of the machine ignore billions of people who are hungry and excluded and whose livelihoods hang by a thread. They ignore a long warning by established intellectual authorities about the state of the environmental degradation and exhaustion (e.g. [Meadows *et alii*, 1972]) and recent ones about the endogenous end of growth (e.g. [Gordon, 2012 and Krugman, 2013]). They do not mind about these announced catastrophes that could have a detrimental effect on the majority as they believe that an exit from actual

^a My contribution to this debate follows in the line of the ideas introduced by Ivan Illich [1973].

^b According to the definition given by the Collins Concise English Dictionary.

crises will be found by a hyper-cyborg-humanity which might be formed by an oligarchy of the best performers.

The leaders of nations and operators of the mega-machine [Mumford, 1964] want to go on along this technical axis that made our species the champion of all species, able to act on the whole world around us, on other species and on itself. Those who promote it are from the same lineage of our distant ancestors who managed to control fire, long before the birth of humanity, that is before *Homo sapiens* appeared. They are the heirs of those who improved our language skills and who invented and miniaturised cut stone tools over hundreds of thousands of years. *Homo sapiens* went onto to domesticate the natural environment, develop the cultivation of plants and animal husbandry. The result was a proliferation of our species, the urbanisation of groups, the appearance of writing and the formation of vast empires. These new changes to the planet forged a deep gulf with other species.

Gradually *homo sapiens* colonised the whole Earth. And long step by less longer one's, came the Industrial Revolution and an ever growing gap between us and crude nature: artificiality, specific to mankind, have spread out. Steam power and no natural energies, speciality steels and no raw material, information technology and not instinctive moves. The techno-scientist can insert chips underneath our skin which enable us to be recognised, localised, and protected, or rather monitored and controlled, maybe. And why not generate genetically modified humans living away from illnesses and escaping from mortality? A crazed dream, the reality of excess.

A crazed confidence emerged in the mind of the elite, that even in the worst situations, thanks to the progress of science and technology, it is possible to find solutions to get by. Not only on physical matters but also to organise society thanks to society's technicians, that is to say, thanks to cute politicians and shrewd financiers. For this foolish elite, it is no doubt possible to emerge from the crisis along the technological axis which our leaders call: exiting the crisis from the top.

The technical axis is supported by the efficiency of competition between individuals, competition that is stimulated by the pursuit of individual enrichment and the promise of boundless economic growth. This promise is the carrot for all at the global level. Its trickle-down expected effects ensure that everyone stick to the collective project to go

on further on the same track. To-morrow everyone will be wealthier: this false hope is nurturing the collective fantasy, the desire ever more to consume which is boosted by a deluge of advertising.

However, between 95% and 99% of people of all nations are fed up with the way they have been living (or surviving) for long, under this technical axis, and they all have a feelings of considerable discontent. Ivan Illich posed the same diagnosis in 1973: “The crisis I have described confronts people with a choice between convivial tools and being crushed by machines” [1973, p. 107]. If the decision is not made for conviviality “Freedom and dignity will continue to dissolve into an unprecedented enslavement of man to his tools” [*Ibid.* p.12]. The move supposes “the shared insight of people that they would be happier if they could *work* together and *care* for each other” [*Ibid.* p.50].

3. A set of general principles as a basis to build a convivial society

The convivialist manifesto [*Varii Auctores*, 2014] brings a few basic ethical and political principles, on which we must organize our societies as convivial societies, in order to achieve what is in line with Illich’s argument: “the only response to this crisis is a full recognition of its depth and an acceptance of inevitable self-limitations” [1973, p.107], or, said differently, to accept a universal interdependence. Let us examine these four principles proposed by the Manifesto as a necessary common doctrinal basis on which it is possible to build convivial societies and a convivial world.

3.1. *The principle of common destiny*

The principle of common destiny acknowledges the inescapable fact of observation that anyone is a member of a single common humanity which is living within a common universe^c. To us, the universe is the observed totality from which everything is part, as we are, as a species and as an

^c I must say that the Manifesto reads only “the principle of common humanity” but I believe it is in order to express the largest recognition of what we all have in common, that is our common humanity which, to its turn, is sharing the lot of all that is around us in the universe: living creatures, the biosphere and the cosmos.

individual as well. We cannot escape that, it is our common destiny, we are an ephemeral^d part of that. We are used to word it LIFE. “There is no wealth but life^e.” There is no other value but life. There is no point measuring this value, there is no equivalent. Life is the air we breathe, the source of sunshine and the earth. It is a swarming interacting mass that has existed from the Big Bang right out to the unknown extremities of the universe. Locally, LIFE is nature and the human beings are one of nature’s species, who came late to this Earth and which is only one among 9 million species living on the planet. Humanity is born within our natural environment. We owe it our lives which are part of it and we must pay attention to it and respect it. All human beings are made up of cells, DNA, molecules and physicochemical matter. The gift of a tiny part of life is there to be received by any human person. The sun, air, water, sky and stars, her or his parents, her or his family, and their groups interact with any of them from their birth and even before.

Whatever the initial differentiations, and whatever subsequent differentiations become, because of their personal life-stories and different living environments, all human beings share the necessary humility to recognise that life has been given to them and that they share the destiny of a universe. Consequently, “beyond differences in skin-colour, nationality, language, culture, religion and wealth, gender and sexual orientation, there is only one humanity, and that humanity must be respected in the person of each of its members” [*Varii Auctores*, 2014, p. 30].

3.2. *The principle of common sociality*

“Human beings are social beings and their greatest wealth lies in their social relationships” [*Varii Auctores*, 2014, p.31].

Received life cannot flourish in individual solitude. Mankind’s offspring cannot survive from birth. It cannot move or feed itself independently and it takes several years to acquire the aptitudes necessary for survival. Human beings are beings whose lives can only be led together, in

^d It is worth remembering that the stars themselves, on a different time-scale to that of humans, are ephemeral. One day they too will disappear, as will our sun, and blend into life as it continues...

^e [Ruskin, 1860] inspired Gandhi who translated this book into gujarati in 1908.

interaction between them and with the natural environment. As Maurice Godelier writes [2012], because of humanity's group existence, it takes more than a man and a woman to make a child. In order for human life to flourish, humans have to become a part of the group. They must not only develop physiological and physical aptitudes, but also aptitudes for life, i.e. for interaction with others and with their environment: they have to learn the gestures, language, words, and attitudes that are suitable at the right moment, in the right place. An individual's construction begins physically and culturally by training, an education received by the human being. Our life together gives us characteristics unique to our species – above and beyond the planet's vast diversity – and which make our humanity unique. Today, there is only one single human species.

3.3. The principle of individuation: individuals blossom by interdependence.

“Always bearing in mind these two first principles, a legitimate politics is one that allows each of us to assert our distinctive evolving individuality as fully as possible by developing our *capabilities*, our potential to be and to act without harming others' potential to do the same, with a view to achieving *equal freedom for all*.” [Varii Auctores, 2014, p. 31].

Every human being is welcomed into and educated by a group that is part of a concrete natural environment where she/he gradually creates and constructs her/his own unique individuality by developing her/his power to be and to act [Spinoza, 1677]. The ideal of paying attention to others implies to give recognition to everyone [Honneth, 1992] and to give to everyone the autonomy necessary to the affirmation and evolution of her/his own individual life, which responds to everyone's universal need.

This freedom to exercise ones' power to be and to act offers individuals an autonomy that does not extend to autarkic independence that would enable her/him to make an abstraction of others and the natural environment. Autonomy and solitude can only be relative, as is their role in the construction of everybody's individuality. Interactions with the environment and with others are permanent and essential. In parallel, we must refuse the idea that individuality is only a product of environmental conditioning and of ones' social group, on a given

physico-chemical basis. But as long as any subsequent outside influence on the thinking, acting individual, does not lead to dependency, outside influence is essential. Combined with autonomy it enables us to consider that individuality is formed and is living in a state of interdependency^f. Interdependency between human beings and with an environment constitutes a fundamental reality that a humanity in search of conviviality has to recognise. Recognising this overall interdependency is the corollary of recognising the gift of life.

3.4. The principle of managed conflict or creative interdependence

“Given that each of us has the power to express our distinctive individuality, it is natural that human beings should sometimes oppose one another. But it is only legitimate for them to do so as long as this does not jeopardize the framework of common sociality that ensures this rivalry is productive and non-destructive. *Good politics* is therefore politics that allows human beings to be individual by accepting and managing conflict” [*Varii Auctores*, 2014, p. 31].

All human beings have to recognise the gift of life and to build their lives together, in interdependence with each other and with the natural environment, within constituted groups. Every human being is a locus for one of an infinity of life forces, the interactions of which have been modulated to constitute, without endangering, their common sociality within a group. Each member of a group is relatively dependent on this and benefits from relative autonomy.

The word “collective” could apply to the informal personalisation of the common sociality of individual human beings living in a group, within an environment, a group which is then forming an “us”. This group will follow a same direction, sharing a common destiny, provided that certain conditions exist. It supposes that a general will can form itself to clearly express the framework accepted and respected by all. This is

^f Interdependence is opposed to both dependence and independence, and simultaneously it is a combination of both dependence and independence; this reasoning that goes beyond the definitive opposition of two terms is contrary to the law of the excluded middle (*tertium non datur*), it is consistent with the logics of the tetralemma.

the Common Law, under which all human beings can interact with the feeling of living altogether, a good, worthy, just life.

The harmony between individuals and the natural environment cannot be established spontaneously. Rivalry and conflict create futures and often lead to destruction in the present. Earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and the fangs and venom of other species remind humans that the forces of nature are powerful. A crushed shell liberates its seed which in turn dies so that the plant can bear fruit. As long as the natural equilibrium is respected, ploughed soils and drained swamps improve human environments without deteriorating them.

Struggle engages the body and makes it stronger. Ideas collide so that minds may expand and so that discussion and negotiation might take place between conflicting positions. Conviviality has to transform enemies into adversaries so that conflict can take place without massacre, and so that collectives may flourish in order for everyone to live to the full. The common social bond must be preserved. Peace must reign. Enemies must disappear, as well as the desire to kill, or at least the enactment of this desire.

The illusion of liberal democracy rests on the hypothesis that trade on free markets will radically change the landscape of conflicts. The confrontation of people would be displaced in the pacific economic scene, turning enemies into competitors. This is a fallacy which has been quite hidden as long as unlimited growth seemed possible. As long as an expected better future seemed plausible in a tamed capitalism[§], it played the role of a hypnotic drug for the victims of the economic massacre.

But the sheer reality is that humanity still suffers from both kind of wars, that of physical terror and that of economical terror. To preserve the common social bond, everyone must limit both his desire to kill and his desire to get more than what is collectively considered as his fair part. This was pointed out by Illich under this wording “an acceptance of inevitable self-limitations” [1973, p.107]. This means to stop the desire for always more which is greed. Plato linked the interdiction of greed, conceptualised as *pleonexia* (*πλεονεξία*), with justice. As incest is still a taboo to preserve the social bond, *pleonexia* should be taken again as a

[§] Tamed thanks to the revolts of the oppressed and by the introduction of countervailing powers [Galbraith, 1952] into the working of societies mainly after the Great Crisis (1929).

taboo [Dufour, 2015], in order to preserve the sustainability of our societies by keeping hubris at bay.

4. As a conclusion

To be sure, it is a herculean task to try to have our societies, to have the whole humanity, working on the basis of these principles.

To a certain extent, a large proportion of humanity is convinced of our common destiny: the international community approved the universal declaration of human rights which is the simplest version of the manifesto's first principle. However its enforcement is still a work in progress.

As far as the second principle is concerned, the idea that the social bond is preeminent is widespread in the population. But this is not the position of the dominant school of economists, followed by a significant group of social scientists and essayists. Recently, an ever larger proportion of governments, listening to these "experts", have reduced their social policies even if the politicians who head them are not known as adepts of neo-liberal ideas. The dominant thinking among politicians is that of Friedrich Hayek [1988] who wrote that "society" is a term deployed when people "do not quite know what they are talking about." In order to have a society working under the second principle of the Manifesto, democracy should be strong enough to impose the people's will to the present oligarchy.

On the other hand, to get a majority of people understanding and accepting the contents of the last two principles seems to be a very big challenge. As a matter of fact, the search for independence by any individuals is the basis of the deification of freedom, a victory of enlightenment and liberalism against thousands of years of dependence, exploitation, enslavement. To forbid greed, and to make it as a taboo in order to stop the economic massacre of humanity and nature is a terrific move. It is to break into pieces the collective dream of unlimited growth and to replace it by fair sharing of the results of the work of all, which is upsetting the common way to think and to act. Such a move supposes "the shared insight of people that they would be happier if they could *work* together and *care* for each other" [Illich, 1973, p.50].

To be sure here and there, millions of localised changes are already implemented by perhaps 100 million people – this means around 1.5% of the world population- who do share this insight. They organise at least a small part of their individual and collective life at a micro-level, according to these principles: this is what is done, e.g. by activities which are known as solidarity economy. At the level of societies, of nation-states, there are no such significant moves, in spite of attempts by activists to get some laws limiting the detrimental effects of the megamachine. For instance, unconditional basic income or limitation to the extent of the income scale are still targeted in vain by various political and activist movements in different nation-states.

Nevertheless, who may believe that such a series of small incremental changes, already present at the micro level or that could emerged at a macro-level in some nation-state, would be able to switch us from this world to one which could be based on these four principles? The move we need is radical and a real upheaval is necessary to build such a better and sustainable world, and, doing so, to escape from the looming catastrophes. What could it be? How will it be operated?

Personally, even if I think that along with the intellectual battle of ideas it will be necessary to have a political fight, I share the optimism showed by Illich [1973, p. 103]: “Some fortuitous coincidence will render publicly obvious the structural contradictions between stated purposes and effective results in our major institutions. People will suddenly find obvious what is now evident to only a few: that the organization of the entire economy toward the “better” life has become the major enemy of the *good* life. Like other widely shared insights, this one will have the potential of turning public imagination inside out. Large institutions can quite suddenly lose their respectability, their legitimacy, and their reputation for serving the public good. It happened to the Roman Church in the Reformation, to Royalty in the Revolution. The unthinkable became obvious overnight: that people could and would behead their rulers”.

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