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**Special Academic Session:** Re-Embedding the Economy: Convivial Degrowth?

**Coordinator:** *Andrea Vetter*

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**What Kind of Economy in a Convivial Society?**

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**First draft, please do not quote.**

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The following text has been prepared to be presented at the 5th International De-Growth Conference in Budapest during a session to be held at Corvinius University on the 31st of August 2016. The theme of this session, prepared by Frank Adloff and Andrea Vetter, is

**“Re-Embedding the Economy : Convivial Degrowth”.**

Let me start to acknowledge that I am involved in the strand of thought launched in 2010 around the ideas of conviviality, of convivial society. These ideas were brought in by Ivan Illich in 1973- to which we added “convivialism”. This addition means that beyond the empirical way to organise society by using “convivial tools”, according to Illich[[1]](#footnote-1), it appears to us that we need not only a theory of their working to maintain the conviviality they are supposed to bring, but also we need a state of mind to be willing to promote the use of this kind of tools and to do the necessary research to master them. In a nutshell, we do need a theoretical and doctrinal basis. To meet that, we pointed out the fundamental importance of four principles – drawn from existing human wisdom - which we have presented in a Manifesto[[2]](#footnote-2).

In the simplest manner, we may say that convivialism is related to conviviality which expresses a way to live altogether in a peaceful ambiance, even in a joyful manner. It is a civilisation, i.e. *a* *total culture and way of life[[3]](#footnote-3)* where people are feeling well with themselves, with others and with Nature. But how to live peacefully, joyfully, with happiness in a group, in a family, in a city, in a country, in the world?

Intellectual and social scientists must try to address this question, and they may do that in diverse ways to produce new theories and doctrines since the existing ones seem to have failed. At least this is the opinion of “convivialists” whereas most tenants of existing theories and doctrines stand for the idea that the failure is that of the implementation of their own theories of their own doctrines[[4]](#footnote-4). Some are really blind, other are malevolent as they claim that the world as it is, is nice and does not need strong changes.

Anyway, I and my fellow convivialist along with a lot of dissident people, academics, intellectuals and activists, we think that the world is far from nice and that this is the outcome of the cultural hegemon imposed by irrelevant and dangerous theories and doctrines. As a convivialist, I will not spend my time to criticize in details these irrelevant ways of thinking and to fight their arguments one after the other, e.g. Growth? Degrowth!. As explained on the homepage of the Conference, De-growth is a “bomb word” (http://budapest.degrowth.org/) to fight the existing ideology of growth. Surely this is a legitimate fight. Nevertheless, I do think that academics and activists involved under this banner are not only fighters but are also willing to live under another rule than growth. However, to reverse the steam is not enough as a programme to know how to organise life not only without growth but without this deleterious obsession. People need a positive orientation on a different track.

Convivialism is a “life word”, an attempt to build a world where it is good to work and to live altogether within Nature. Convivialists have the ambition to bring to reality “the shared insight of people that they would be happier if they could *work* together and *care* for each other” as Illich put it [1973, p.50 – please, my fellow Mr *and* Ms, note the word “care” italicised by Illich himself].

There is a gigantic lot of research to do in order to enlighten how a convivial society can work. Questions as the following ones are of importance. What is necessary or not as a model of government, what is necessary or not as a collective dynamic, narrative, imagination, what are the necessary or not guides for personal behaviours, what are the necessary or not changes in the existing structures and institutions? I will try to deal with one general perspective raised by the last question and I will bring only a few simple ideas on that. Assuming that in a convivial society it will be still necessary to work and to produce and to have a distribution of goods and services, we must find out the kind of economy we need, this is necessary to decide about the change to make in most structures and institutions.

The central point for this perspective is the following. We have to get out of a situation of centrality of the Economy[[5]](#footnote-5). A French philosopher (Emmanuel Mounier[[6]](#footnote-6)) expressed this urgent task in 1949 “The primary place of Economy is an historical disorder and we must get rid of it”.

Thus, not only The Economy must be at the service of the Society, but this means too, that the way the Economy is working must be consistent with this service. In other words, The Economy must work accordingly to its duty. Let me discuss these two imperatives.

**1- The Economy must be at the service of the Society**

What does mean to be at the service of the Society? It means (i) that the Economy must meet the Society’s expectations and (ii) that the Economy must help the Society to pursue its aims.

**The Economy must meet the Society’s expectations**

Society expects that some activities are organised to make available a series of goods and services to be distributed and produced thanks to technologies which must be designed and implemented. The right Economy must meet the needs and the legitimate desires of the people of the society. But desires are unlimited and the means to satisfy them are of an infinite variety. How to secure that the legitimate needs are met, how to choose among the needs of different people? How to choose the technology to create, to use, how to choose the goods, the services to produce? It is a very complex question.

It is not enough to claim: *Economy must answer the needs!*, as if needs were objective data known before any economic activity. The need for food is universal, but the need for goulash, or for mac-burger are not given data. Thus it is not enough to claim: *Economy must be the one where enterprises are meeting the Society’s needs!* What appears, at a certain point in time and space, as so-called Society’s needs, are the needs that have been built by markets, by the violence of money, by power relations. By the market power of Giant Firms, by the purchasing power of the most fortunate, by the power of manipulation by advertising propaganda, by the corruption power of lobbys etc.

To recover a basic autonomy in deciding what Society should do, should produce, should research, should innovate, there must be an Economy that reduces its dependence vis-à-vis the market and its dependence on the use of money. Perret [[7]](#footnote-7), among others- advocates to launch a process of de-commodification. A lot of choices must escape from the market and its so-called efficiency and be subordinated to ethics. As Michael Sandel[[8]](#footnote-8) puts it, we must establish “the moral limits of markets”. What really counts for us, for our society? What are the priorities? We cannot let the markets decide. It depends on the aims the Society wants to pursue.

**The Economy must help the Society to pursue its aims**

In the current world, any society is told what to do by the market directly or through experts who calculate the efficiency index to compare possibilities and to choose the most efficient one. Markets, the battlefield of all the powers - I have just recalled a short list of them- dictate what to do. They deliver the measure of the global performance: the sum of market exchange values called GDP. And it is expected to have a high rate of growth! This is non-sense. Since Society must take sufficient autonomy from Markets, clearly the ultimate goal of Society cannot refer to an index delivered by Markets.

The goal of society is to pursue the *Common Good* – singular, which is a different concept than the one used to speak of one of *the common goods*, plural. This concept disappeared with the modern times. It had been proposed by Aristotle and rediscovered in the 13th century, by Thomas Aquinas. With the economic modernisation, under the reign of individualism, the Common Good retreated in some religious circles. However, a few academics[[9]](#footnote-9) have re-read what gives us a bright light on the nature of society, which is based on the Common Good. “The feeling that we exist (*aïsthèsis oti estin*) is inseparable from the co-existence (*suzein*) and from relations of affection and friendship (*filia)*that make it a valuable Common Good[[10]](#footnote-10)”. This must not be confused with the general interest, which is an utilitarian vision of a feasible combination of individual interests. The proper good of anyone comes, must go, through the Common Good[[11]](#footnote-11). This is the Primacy of the Common Good[[12]](#footnote-12). Flahault takes an example from Hugo Grotius who wrote “Human Nature would lead us to seek relationships with our fellow human beings, even if we would need nothing[[13]](#footnote-13)”.

The existence of any of us is social and ecological. We do exist only by our social relations and these relations exist only in a life environment. As this is the lot of all of us, this makes the world, our common world. Thus our primary task and our ultimate goal is to maintain, to sustain and to improve what constitutes our Common Good.How Economy can help the Society to pursue the Common Good?

Here, the common goods – plural- play a leading role. Among these common goods[[14]](#footnote-14), some are *granted by Nature*, as the sun gives us light and warm, and the earth gives us fresh water and clean air…Other common goods are *the fruit of our culture*, as our relationships, smiles, civility, affection and are inexhaustible! Finally, some are *prepared by activities of the society* as public lighting after sunset, water collection and distribution, laws and norms as the high way code, public services, as Health, Education …

Some of these common goods have to be produced, some of the common goods require to be maintained, all must be shared so that everyone can access them. In many cases it is necessary to regulate this access. The crucial point in changing the role of Economy is that a large number of the common goods, that are all of primary importance to contribute to the Common Good, have become invisible and that there is no one to take care of them. It is this disappearance that led to a large portion of the social and ecological degradation of our world. The culprit is the kind of working of the Economy which must be put under scrutiny. Let me turn to this second imperative.

**2- The Economy must work accordingly to its duty**

Since a convivial Society has to reduce the place of Market, it must find, for everything out of the market, a different process to organise the allocation of means, the distribution and the sharing of goods and services. We can make towards a solution with the principle of deliberative solidarity. For the rest, the Market, that will be in operation, must be regulated so that the powers in this battlefield can be countervailed. The main point could be a question of size, that can be seized with a more general principle, that of subsidiarity.

**The principle of deliberative solidarity**

Solidarity is the only empirical principle for the organisation of activities which is in line with the basic principle of the Convivialist Manifesto. This principle of Solidarity is the main obstacle to resist the general extension of the Market, according to Alain Supiot[[15]](#footnote-15).  It is still in operation, here and there, thanks to the resilience of the tradition of cooperatives, mutualism, associations. It shows a path to follow provided that solidarity goes beyond that of particular groups (Coraggio, 2007[[16]](#footnote-16)). This is also this principle which is at the core of the more recent activities organised by the social and solidarity economy. Again this tool, to be a tool for conviviality, must be open to the whole society, considered as a political community.

Past and current experiences of solidarity are embedded in an economy mainly monitored by Markets Law. Thus they hardly keep the bases of their rules of working and despite their ever growing number, they are unable to upset the global evolution. They will deliver their potential when another kind of economy will be settled.

More broadly, instead of priority to competition, the priority must be given to cooperation. This will change radically the behaviour of people, even if competition will be still a source of emulation to improve the working of the economy. The process of selection, when necessary, will be organised on a deliberative basis which is consistent with the priority to cooperation and solidarity.

This principle of deliberative solidarity, within a community, will replace competition in Market battlefields. It will achieve its task to make and to keep the Economy at the service of Society as far as it does not face insurmountable obstacles. Such obstacles will arise according to the size of what must be operated by this way.

**The principle of strong subsidiarity**

The principle of subsidiarity is a principle to limit and to regulate the size of tools, the size of enterprises and the size of institutions as well. “Tool” must be understood with the general meaning given by Illich in his book which title is “Tools for conviviality”. A Tool is any device operated by Society to do something. Illich claims that “a Tool, beyond a certain threshold, from being a servant is becoming a despot[[17]](#footnote-17)”.

Illich thought that a lot of institutions in industrialised countries had already overtaken the limits: they were not only counterproductive, but enslaving the people. He wrote books, for example about School and Medicine to make that clear. He made it explicit also for the size of enterprises. “When an enterprise grows beyond a certain point on this scale, it first frustrates the end for which it was originally designed, and then rapidly becomes a threat to society itself[[18]](#footnote-18).” At a time when States were governing Enterprises, they set up laws to forbid the excess of size and trust. In the USA the idea of a regulation of competition started in New York and followed at the Federal level with the Sherman Act in 1890, the Clayton antitrust Act in 1914. This kind of legislation disseminated everywhere, but step by step, States were convinced by lobbies that consumers were “served” by Giant firms and not to take care of Society and of the Common Good.

Finally, we are surrounded by mammoth firms. This is an unbearable violence to the Common Good for the sake of higher profits and shareholder value.

To be sure the size of institutions, even the one of collective authorities, local, regional and national is under debate. EU introduced the concept of subsidiarity as a guide to combine the setting of general rules at the EU level and the maintaining of State and Infra-State provisions. The concept came from dispositions taken in the Roman Catholic Church. They were re-read so that a level of administration will perform “only those tasks which cannot be performed effectively at a more immediate or local level[[19]](#footnote-19)”. To be sure the criteria, to decide the right level, in a convivial society, will not be economic efficiency, but the contribution to the Common Good as valued by a deliberation between concerned people.

Enterprises and Political communities as well, must follow this principle of strong subsidiarity. We all would like conviviality at the world level, some of us are advocating for a world citizenship. It is still a long way to get there, starting from the bottom. From the individual, the group, the family, the village or the district, the city, the province, the state. To each level we may try to organize open communities guided by the convivialist principles and go up, respecting the principle of strong subsidiarity. Strong because it is clear that it must be necessary to downsize a lot of Institutions and Enterprises.

As far as this principle is concerned, we must focus also, for the economy, on short circuits. This imposes to relocate production avoiding unnecessary national and international trade, we must flush away the non-sense of big banks as well as big firms, and take care of Nature. We must focus in organising our lives on caring of each of us, which is not possible in too large communities, which leads to questions that are beyond the topic of this presentation, despite its link to the strong subsidiarity principle.

To finish my remarks on subsidiarity I quote again Illich[[20]](#footnote-20) “The only response to this crisis is a full recognition of its depth and an acceptance of inevitable self-limitations”.

**As a conclusion**

These lines are simple contributions to the debate open by the Convivialist Manifesto (see its four principles in Annex) to which all interested people are invited to join. Thus this is not time for a conclusion yet.

De Growth followers, activists, and academics are welcome in the convivialist debate. I am sure that a lot of targeted research by De-Growth academics and also by academics involved in some many out-of-doxa fields, are of interest to help building a convivial society. Provided that the bulk of this research be consistent with the idea to avoid to let Economy take a central place in the working of our societies.

Marc Humbert

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| **Annex**  **The four principles of the Convivialist Manifesto**  ***The principle of common humanity***  The Manifesto reads “the principle of common humanity”. 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, it is sharing the lot of all that is around us in the universe: living creatures, the biosphere and the cosmos.  Thus I think that a better wording would be *The principle of common destiny.* Anyone is a member of a single common humanity which is living within a common universe  ***The principle of common sociality***  “Human beings are social beings and their greatest wealth lies in their social relationships” [2014, p.31].  ***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*.” [2014, p. 31].  ***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” [, 2014, p. 31]. |

1. Illich, Ivan (1973): Tools for Conviviality. New York: Harper & Row. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This strand of thought started after a Conference I organised in Tokyo in 2010 when I worked there; it was relayed by Alain Caillé who had been one of the speakers. We published altogether a first book along with Serge Latouche and Patrick Viveret in 2011 (De la convivialité, dialogues sur la société conviviale à venir [About conviviality, dialogues on the convivial society to come] Paris: La Découverte). Then discussions started in Paris with several tens of academics and intellectuals which led to a collective book written to launch this strand of thought in the intellectual circles. It was published in 2013 under the title : Manifeste convivialiste – Déclaration d’interdépendance [Convivialist Manifesto – Declaration of Interdependance], Paris: Le Bord de l’Eau. An English translation followed thanks to Frank Adloff, and was published in 2014: *Convivialist Manifesto – A declaration of interdependence,* with an introduction by Adloff, F. translated, by Clarke, M. Center for Global Cooperation Research, Global Dialogues 3, Duisburg. He organised also a translation into German. There are also translations available in Portuguese and in Japanese and translations of an abridged version in several languages. See <http://lesconvivialistes.org>. There is a growing number of books and papers published around these ideas. Frank Adloff launched a blog in English <http://convivialism.org/> . He has just posted a text related to this session “Degrowth Meets Convivialism: Pathways to a Convivial Society”. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. According to the definition of civilisation given by the Collins Concise English Dictionary [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The rest of them claim that they are able to make some little change to have their theory, their doctrine perfect. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Let me make a joke: Economy is already in the bed and there is no place left for the rest. Love first! [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Emmanuel Mounier (1949) *Le Personnalisme*, Paris, PUF. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Bernard Perret (2015), *Au-delà du marché – les nouvelles voies de la démarchandisation,* Paris, Les petits matins et Institut Veblen. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Michael Sandel (2012), *WHAT MONEY CANT BUY 6 The Moral Limits to Markets,* New-York, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux. This point about the importance of the moral dimension has been stressed in the last (issued last June) book by Alain Caillé et les convivialistes (2016), *Eléments de politique convivialiste*, Paris, Le Bord de l’eau (p.23). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See for example: Michael Smith, 1995, *Human Dignity and the Common Good in the Aristotelian-Thomistic Tradition, Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter,* Mellen University Press and Birgit Daiber and François Houtard (eds), 2012, *A Postcapitalist Paradigm: The Common Good of Humanity,* Brussels, Rosa Luxembourg Foundation. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Here I have translated François Flahault (2011 : *Où est passé le bien commun? ,* Paris, Mille et une nuits, p. 114) who is using the words of Aristotle (Nicomachean Ethics) . [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Flahault, *op.cit*., p.209. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Charles De Konninck,1997, « On the Primacy of the Common Good », *The Aquinas Revew,* 4,1. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Flahault, *op.cit*., p.209. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Since Hardin this concept has been deeply searched. However, a noticeable work has been that of Elinor Ostrom (1990), Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action, Cambridge University Press. In French were issued the following recent books : Benjamin Coriat (sous la direction de) (2015), *Le retour des communs,* Paris, Les liens qui libèrent and Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, 2014, *Commun, Essai sur la révolution du XXIème siècle,* Paris, La Découverte. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Alain Supiot (dir) 2015, *La Solidarité – Enquête sur un principe juridique,* Paris, Odile Jacob. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. José-Luis Coraggio (2007) « Une autre économie est-elle possible sans une (autre) politique ? » Revue Tiers Monde, vol. XLVIII, n°190, pp. 401-416. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The quotation is from the French version that was published a little time after the English one, and with some addition from Illich himself. In French it reads « passé un certain seuil, l’outil de serviteur devient despote » (Ivan Illich, 1973, *De la convivialité*, Paris Le Seuil, p. 13. This is my translation. In the English version it reads (p. xxiv) “To formulate a theory about a future society both very modern and not dominated by industry, it will be necessary to recognize natural scales and limits. We must come to admit that only within limits can machines take the place of slaves; beyond these limits they lead to a new kind of serfdom”. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. English version, p.xxii. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. According to the Oxford English Dictionary. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. English version, p. 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)