The Neglected Nexus
between Conviviality and Inequality

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The Neglected Nexus between Conviviality and Inequality

Sérgio Costa

Abstract

Starting from a detailed review of recent publications oriented by the concept of conviviality and etymologically related expressions (*convivialisme*, *Konvivenz*, *Konvivialität*), the article explores a common analytical deficit in these different contributions: the disregard of the reciprocal constitution of conviviality and inequality. To overcome this deficiency, the essay develops an analytical framework, according to which inequalities – defined along four complementary and interdependent axes (material, power, environmental and epistemological asymmetries) – are always signified, reproduced, and negotiated within convivial interactions.

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> Until the lions invent their own stories, the hunters will always be the heroes of the hunting narratives.
>
> (African proverb cited by Couto 2012: 9)

1.   Introduction

Since the incorporation of the term conviviality to the humanities vocabulary by Ivan Illich (1973), a wide variety of heterogeneous contributions have applied the categories and tools developed by Illich to various fields of knowledge or have even expanded and reformed his concepts to adapt them to the study of contemporary problems. This article has two objectives. The first is to systematize this vast discussion, seeking to grasp, in its various currents and forms, useful ideas that could support a research program dedicated to studying the nexus of the reciprocal constitution between conviviality and inequality. The second objective stems from the first. In dialog with the literature reviewed, the article seeks to specify the nexus between inequality and conviviality and offer some methodological suggestions on how to study this nexus. The structure of this article is determined by its objectives. While the first and longer section reviews the debate about conviviality, the second discusses the nexus between conviviality and inequality and the third and final section focuses on methodological aspects.[1]

2.   Conviviality: State of the Art

Based on three etymologically related concepts, *Konvivenz, convivialisme* and conviviality, a varied group of analytical and normative programs has recently emerged. Despite their affinities and overlappings, these programs have developed independently, motivated by theoretical and political impulses that are not always congruent and compatible with each other. Nevertheless, their etymological kinship reveals common concerns. This involves, in all the cases, the analysis and search for ways to live together in society. In some approaches, 'living together' is understood not only as ordinary life among human beings, but also between humans and nonhumans such as plants and animals, spirits and artefacts.

2.1 *Convivialisme*

Discussions on *convivialisme* can be traced back to the French journal MAUSS (Mouvement anti-utilitariste dans les sciences sociales) and sociologist Alain Caillé at the University Paris-Nanterre. With the publication of the Convivialist Manifesto in 2013 (Les Convivialistes 2013) and its translation into various languages, the discussions about *convivialisme* began spreading far beyond France. From a theoretical perspective, *convivialisme* relates to the work of French anthropologist and sociologist Marcel Mauss (1872-1950), specifically on his argument that the gift and not utilitarian reason is the primordial and foundational element of social interactions. Another important fundament of *convivialisme* is the critique of economic growth developed by thinkers such as economist Serge Latouche and philosopher Patrick Viveret (2014). According to this critique, the living standard attained by the richest countries in the 1970s should serve as a worldwide standard of material wealth to be made universal. This implies a global redistribution of wealth and the development of sustainable production technologies dedicated to a new form of relating to nature and other living beings (Les Convivialistes 2013: 32). Politically speaking, *convivialisme* is a doctrine that, according to Caillé (2011: 8), "simultaneously synthesizes and goes beyond the four grand ideologies of modernity: liberalism, socialism, anarchism and communism."

According to the diagnosis of the convivialists (Les Convivialistes 2013: 26), capitalism, especially in its current configuration of financial capitalism, destroys the greatest human asset which is "the richness of its social relations". By disrupting conviviality among human beings, capitalism also undermines their relationship with nature. Accordingly, capitalism produces social inequalities among people, countries and regions, which, ethically unacceptable, prevent establishing an equilibrium between working and living, thus destroying solidarity and the ecological basis of our existence. Based on this diagnosis, the convivialists defend a change of course that would lead towards the creation of a convivial society, which should be constructed under democratic conditions and through respect for social, cultural and existential plurality (Caillé and Chanial 2014). Although The Convivialists themselves can be seen as a transnational social movement, *convivialisme* as a concept is used to articulate a diverse range of other social movements, including movements critical of economic growth and the acceleration of daily life (*décroissance*, degrowth, slow food, etc.), as well as ecological movements (Adloff 2018).

2.2   *Konvivenz*

The neologism *Konvivenz* was coined in the realm of the *Lebenswissen* (Life Knowledge) research program, led, in the past two decades, by the literary scholar Ottmar Ette from the University of Potsdam. Today, the program has followers in various universities in Germany, Latin America and the Caribbean, at research centres with which Ette and his group collaborate. According to the Life Knowledge program, the concept of *Konvivenz* articulates the very idea of what it is to live and its irreversible, indivisible and unforeseeable nature. To live together in society thus represents the context of experience in which knowledge about living is generated and exchanged. Literature, and particularly literature "without a fixed abode", is understood as the only legitimate "science of life" as the vehicle that transports the "knowledge about living together". At the same time, however, literature is more than a vehicle. In contact with its contemporary and future readers, literature itself produces knowledge about and for living together:

> Literature makes available knowledge that is important to coexistence and survival, and this is because it thinks in an integrated manner about the logics of the different forms of living, having them become liveable and 'relivable' (Ette 2010: 62).

The ability of literature to generate and transform polylogical forms of knowledge about living together becomes clear if living is no longer conceived in terms of a binary distinction between fiction and reality, but is rather understood as a complex and open concept, in which the pre-existing, that is, the repertoires inherited through history and "the invented (therefore 'fictional') find themselves linked with the lived (and which is to be lived)" (Ette 2012: 76).

According to Ette, the pre-existent, the invented and the lived have a certain correspondence with the interaction between burden, cunning and pleasure (in German: *der Last, die List, die Lust*), as analysed by Roland Barthes in his 1973 book *Le plaisir du texte*. Ette's reconstruction of Barthes's work contributes decisively to the epistemic and theoretical positioning adopted by the program that he created. It involves a post-deconstructivist approach to difference, that deconstructs the logocentric philosophy of the subject and its dichotomies (man/woman, white/black, dominant/dominated, etc.), but without arriving at the immeasurability of differences and *différances*, as Derrida would have it (1972 [1967]). It involves a "paradoxal dissimulation" that "does not deny

or attack the signs of the discourse of the other, but rather disfigures them" (Ette 2010: 288-289; 2012: 94).[2]

The semantic subversion operated by the disfiguration of signs inspires the political project inherent to the Life Knowledge program. The concept of culture related to this disfiguration of signs denies the idea of cultures as closed containers that coexist, multiculturally, alongside each other. It also does not involve an intercultural relationship, in which stable cultural units communicate with each other. Instead, the establishment of polylogical structures of thinking, understanding and translation should originate a transcultural mixture, characterized largely by the mutual transformation of cultures that interpenetrate and merge with each other (Ette 2012: 89).

This semantic of cultural mixing that uses metaphors such as cultural archipelagos and kaleidoscopes connects the Life Knowledge program with the environments, theoretical lines and concepts developed by intellectuals from the former French and Spanish colonies in the Caribbean. This is particularly clear in the discussion undertaken by Gesine Müller (2018a) on concepts such as *creolité* and *caribeanidad*.

2.3 Conviviality

The term *conviviality*[3] is currently associated with various analytical and theoretical programs. Some are closer, others are farther from the definition coined when the term was introduced into the humanities vocabulary in *Tools for Conviviality* published in 1973 by the Catholic priest, Viennese theologian and philosopher Ivan Illich. At that time, Illich was leading in Cuernavaca, Mexico, the Centro Intercultural de Documentación (CIDOC), a space where intellectuals from Latin America and from various parts of the world gathered to exchange ideas. The book is theoretically and politically inspired by at least two important sources. The first is generically called the third-worldist movement of the 1960s, which incorporated elements from the African decolonial movements as well as the highly diverse voices in support of the oppressed that spread through Latin America at the time, from the local reconstructions of Marxism to the liberation theology of Gustavo Gutiérrez and Hélder Câmara and the pedagogy of the oppressed

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2 Post-deconstructivism here means – like other concepts composed in a similar manner, such as post-structuralism and post-colonialism – not a renunciation of deconstructive methods, but internalizing and surpassing them. That is, in keeping with post-structuralism, post-deconstructivism deconstructs the national and multicultural identities respectively celebrated by assimilationism and multiculturalism. At the same time, by seeking opportunities for the coexistence of these thus dereified differences, the post-deconstructivist approaches transcend post-structuralism.

3 Writing in German, Adloff (2018) uses the neologism *Konvivialität* (literally conviviality) for the French expression *convivialisme*. Even if the word chosen by the author translates literally as conviviality, Adloff is not included here among the lines that use the expression conviviality because his work is theoretically and programatically more directly associated to *convivialisme*, in the definition of the program led by Allain Caillé.

developed by Paulo Freire. Illich not only read them but also was a regular interlocutor close to all of these intellectuals (Hartch 2015). Illich's second inspiration comes from the radical humanism of thinkers such as Eric Fromm, who was also a friend and interlocutor, with whom Illich shared the interpretation that human talent and virtues are systematically scorned by instrumentalist capitalist rationality and by various totalitarianisms (political, religious, pedagogical, etc.). Because of these inspirations, it is not surprising that Illich's book from 1973 contains a normative appeal to a self-limitation (of consumption and material welfare) despite the increasing possibilities raised by technical and industrial development. For Illich, human beings can only reach convivial life, which is synonymous with emancipation, through a renunciation of instrumental and unidimensional rationality, which is intrinsic to industrial capitalism:

> I choose the term 'conviviality' to designate the opposite of industrial productivity. 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 a man-made environment (Illich 1973: 11).

It would not be an exaggeration to say that after being forgotten for decades, since the first years of this century a true revival of Illich's work can be noted, given the recurrence and enthusiasm with which his tools for conviviality have been reinvented and rediscovered in various fields. Illich was the inspiration behind the first articulations of *convivialisme* in 2010 (Adloff 2018: 11), although, as shown above, since its rise, the movement has aggregated various references, so that Illich's influence is no longer clearly visible in its contemporary discussions. Currently, it is the field of posthumanism that has most decidedly revived and expanded Illich's work, as detailed below.

2.4 Posthuman Conviviality

In the field of so-called posthumanism or the posthuman,[4] Illich became a repeated reference because of his insistence on the interdependence among living beings. To exemplify this trend, various works from two distinct disciplines can be mentioned that are illustrative of similar developments in various fields of knowledge. The first example

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4 Posthumanism is used here to characterize different trends and currents that in recent years have been insisting on the need to break with anthropocentrism and the nature-society dualism at the foundation of modern social sciences and humanities in favor of interpretations that emphasize and explore the inter-relations between human and non-human living beings and other entities such as spirits and artefacts. In the generic form that it is used here, the term also encompasses what has been called new materialism, which, guided by the change of focus on observation and analysis, moves away from non-material social relations for the materiality of interdependence among various beings, which can be analyzed in metabolic processes and in the transformations of the physical state of matter (for an introduction to the concept of posthuman, see Braidotti 2013).

is the work in urban geography of Hinncliffe and Whatmore (2006) who conduct an important expansion and refinement of the theses of *Tools of Conviviality*, building on a variety of inspirations that range from Deleuze's theory of minoritarian politics, feminist philosophy and the actor-network theory of Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers. From these influences arose the concept of living cities that, contrary to the effort of planners to plan and construct modern ascetic and sterile cities, are living spaces of interaction between humans and non-humans:

> Indeed, we want to suggest that nonhumans don't just exist in cities, precariously clinging to the towers and edifices of modernity, but potentially shape and are shaped by their urban relations. Nor do we see these inhabitants as a threat to modernity [...]. Rather, we would like to suggest that the demography of the city, its populace of human and the non-human inhabitants, unsettles the geography of modernity and its forebears (Hinncliffe and Whatmore 2006: 127-128).

For urban planning, this understanding precisely implies treating cities as multispecies entanglements (Houston et al. 2018), that is, as spaces shared by human and non-human living beings, which are not in relationships based on competition or cooperation, but conduct interdependent lives.

The second example is the study of the archaeologist Given (2017) about conviviality in soil. Starting from the finding that a gram of fertile soil can contain up to 200 million bacteria, Given argues that the soil constitutes a paradigmatic case to reveal the interdependencies between human beings that populate, nurture and release detritus onto soil and the non-human beings that contributed in the past and continue to contribute daily to transform the sterile ground into fertile and living soil. According to this interpretation, instead of being seen as occupants, users, predators and, less frequently, those who recuperate the soil, human beings come to be understood as part of the network of "players" who, living in symbiosis, make the soil what it is. Given affirms that the emphasis on symbiosis should not imply reducing conviviality to relations of cooperation, considering that tension and conflict are a constitutive and necessary part of the convivial relations between humans and non-humans, and even among non-humans, on which depend the maintenance of the life cycle of the soil.[5]

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5 The example that Given presents to illustrate interdependent life above moral human judgements is suggestive: "When a goat eats a cyclamen flower, it is irrelevant that this is 'good' for the goat and 'bad' for the flower: what matters is the continuance of the cycles of matter, nutrients and life. A goat eating a flower and returning its nutrients to the soil by defecation and decay maintains the conviviality; it works within the limits of the symbiosis. Spreading tarmac and concrete over once lively soil does not" (Given 2017: 131).

From a theoretical perspective, Given focuses on the combination of conviviality in the terms proposed by Illich, with Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage theory and Latour's actor-network theory:

> What conviviality brings to this [assemblage theory and actor-network theory], other than a certain expressive power driven by the popular connotations of the term, is a commitment to the central role of non-human and non-human-made players. In this sense, it moves on from Illich's own main interests in the establishment of a just society based on individual human freedom, autonomy and responsibility. In another way, however, it brings precisely this practical, future-oriented and ethical approach to our engagement with the landscape. Conviviality is a physical practice, a deep and sensory engagement with the landscape and the world (Given 2017: 131).

Through the incorporation of the idea of conviviality to the paradigm of posthumanism, important discussions have been undertaken about the role and form of knowledge and technique that stem from the thesis of irremediable interdependence between human and non-human living beings and artefacts. Authors involved in these debates insist that the modern division of disciplines between the natural sciences and the humanities and social sciences, as well as the distinction between lay knowledge and specialized knowledge and the separation between scientific and sensorial apprehension of the world, constitute gigantic impediments to understanding the networks of interdependences that are involved here. After all, in the case of the living cities, gardeners, amateur ornithologists and entomologists, and even people living in the streets, contribute as much to the understanding of the interactions in question as professional environmentalists and scientists do (Hinncliffe and Whatmore (2006: 131). Concerning soils, Given calls attention to the limits of theoretical-analytical understanding and for the need that this be complemented by sensorial experience such as touching and feeling the soil:

> [...] people's material engagement with the conviviality of soil has to target what is perceptible as they engage in their various soil tasks: texture, colour, smell, stones, larger pieces of vegetable matter [...] (Given 2017: 133).

Current discussions on the consequences of posthumanism for the reflection on technology revives and in some way deepens Illich's concerns. Arguments in this vein warn that technological innovation cannot be limited to reducing the impact of technology on nature, and operate under the assumption that human beings and

the artefacts they create are part of a universe exterior to nature. Accordingly, it is mandatory to accept the inseparability between humans and non-human beings in order to create technologies capable of interacting with nature: "the ideal of convivial technologies is clearly that of being useful in an ecological cycle" (Vetter 2017: 6).

2.5   Fragile Convivialities

In addition to its use in efforts to update and give continuity to Illich's reflections, the term conviviality has also been widely used in contemporary debate, in other contexts and with other meanings, without necessarily referring to the pioneering work of the Austrian theologian. This is the case of British sociologist Paul Gilroy (2004, 2006) who turns to the concept of conviviality to respond to various challenges that have a common origin: the reification of identity. This involves, in the first place, a criticism of the mobilization of the vocabulary that celebrates individual or collective identities for the simple purpose of aggregating market value to various products, as in "ethnic tourism" or "identity goods":

> The term 'identity' has recently acquired great resonance, both inside and outside the academic world. It offers far more than an obvious, common-sense way of talking about individuality, community, and solidarity and has provided a means to understand the interplay between subjective experiences of the world and the cultural and historical settings in which those fragile, meaningful subjectivities are formed. Identity has even been taken into the viscera of postmodern commerce, where the goal of planetary marketing promotes not just the targeting of objects and services to the identities of particular consumers but the idea that any product whatsoever can be suffused with identity. Any commodity is open to being 'branded' in ways that solicit identification and try to orchestrate identity (Gilroy 2000: 97-98).

The other challenges confronted by Gilroy are associated to the incorporation of the idea of identity to politics. This is the case of the anti-racist politics that reify the idea of race and of multicultural policies of a liberal nature implemented in England during the 1980s and 1990s that, according to Gilroy, by celebrating diversity, produced a freezing of essentialized and compartmentalized identities (Gilroy 2004, 2010).

According to Gilroy, the responses to the failure of policies of liberal multiculturalism should not lead to the rejection of multiculture, that is, the existing social and cultural diversity. The response also should not involve, according to Gilroy, an appeal to the supposed virtues of Enlightenment universalism, while ignoring its own position in the context of local and global asymmetries of power. For this reason, Gilroy resists the Neo-

Kantian cosmopolitanism of intellectuals that dissolve the differences in the abstract ideal of a global society of altruist and virtuous citizens (Habermas 2004). Instead of a philosophical appeal to the anticipation of the cosmopolitan condition, Gilroy seeks a "cosmopolitanism from below", articulated in the negotiations of daily coexistence with and in difference (Gilroy 2004, 2013, see also Appadurai 2018). By exalting the virtues of this trivial and everyday cosmopolitanism, Gilroy does not deny the existence of racisms, sexisms and other forms of violence against those considered to be different, the author only seeks to acknowledge the emergence of urban environments in which cultural or physical traits normally used to discriminate against people and groups lose, at least in part, their dehumanizing force:

> Conviviality is a social pattern in which different metropolitan groups dwell in close proximity, but where their racial, linguistic and religious particularities do not – as the logic of ethnic absolutism suggests they must – add up to discontinuities of experience or insuperable problems of communication (Gilroy 2006: 40).

Gilroy draws on multiple theoretical sources to develop the concept of conviviality. Particularly visible is the post-structuralist interpretation of differences (in terms of culture, gender etc.), which lacking any ontology, whether material or metaphysical, are conceived as circumstantial and contingent articulations between traits (physical, cultural, etc.), social positions and discourses. Contingent here does not mean random or arbitrary. History and politics, as Gilroy shows, particularly in keeping with the interpretation of so-called Black British Cultural Studies, demarcate the limits and contexts of meaning in which differences are articulated.[6]

An important group of recent studies in the field of migration, mainly in Europe, have implicitly or explicitly adopted the definition coined by Gilroy, according to which conviviality corresponds to articulation and negotiated coexistence of differences in the realm of daily life (see Nowicka and Vertovec 2014). In these studies, conviviality also assumes the character of a social resource for dealing with diversity in the context of situations marked by both cooperation and conflict:

> On analysing cooperative *and* conflictual situations in negotiation and translation processes, convivialities emerge as fragile and changing and only able to

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6 Unlike the conceptualization originally developed by Illich, which offers a clear criticism of industrial capitalism, conviviality in Paul Gilroy's definition does not clearly incorporate a normative-political program. Gilroy focuses only on already existing interactions and experiences, which are by definition fragile and mutant. Nevertheless, the vision of interactions no longer structured by dichotomous cultural frontiers has played an important role in the articulations of Queer movements and immigrants associations critical of current integration policies, particularly in Europe. Moreover,

lead to minimal forms of sociality. Local policies as well as emic discourses in neighbourhoods use various terms to address the everyday living together, which under the conditions of diversification, is pragmatically reformulated as living *with* differences (Heil 2015: 317-318, italics in original).

A similar interpretation of the idea of conviviality in contemporary migration studies that precedes the use coined by Gilroy was developed by authors joined in the collection *The Anthropology of Love and Anger: The Aesthetics of Conviviality in Native Amazonia* (Overing and Passes 2000). The starting point here is the critique of the Western sociological grand narrative, according to which the idea of society is based on "social-structural imperatives (through roles, statuses and juridical rules)" and on the separation between the public and private, between the formal and informal, the domestic and the public sphere (Overing and Passes 2000: 14). Accordingly, among the indigenous groups studied, social conviviality is not guaranteed by rights or by any other impersonal structure or institution that could, at the limit, prescind or even substitute for strong personal ties. To the contrary, it is personal virtues and mutual trust that assure the sociability guided by the inseparability between the public and private spheres.

For the "anthropology of the everyday" that the authors develop, the term conviviality fulfils a fundamental function to the degree that it seeks to describe a type of sociability based on affect, on the indistinctiveness of social spheres, and moreover, on the permanent conversion of potentially disruptive non-human forces such as spirits, catastrophes and divinities, into sources of social life. For the authors, these characteristics make indigenous sociability invisible to sociology, because they are not compatible with the concept of society that the discipline created for itself and that is based on the separation between macrostructures and daily relations.[7] For this reason, instead of society, under its sociological definition, the concept chosen by the authors

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the idea has inspired expressive cultural manifestations in various European countries, articulated around denominations such as postmigrant theatre or postmigrant performance (e.g. Stewart 2017).

7   It is not only in the case of indigenous sociability that the limits of the idea of society on which sociology is based have been questioned. Researching contexts marked by a significant presence of immigrants in the English city of Birmingham, Karner and Parker (2011) show that classic distinctions such as Durkheim's differentiation between mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity or Tönnies's distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* do not apply to the local forms of sociability that they find there. It is a complex sociability marked both by cooperation that the authors give the name of conviviality and by conflict and that is manifest in various social spheres. For Karner and Parker, it is not the social sphere, the institutions or the previous values that generate convivial relations, but the interaction itself: "It is not shared values but involvement in the material practices of daily life and struggles for resources that generate a stake in a locality" (Karner and Parker 2011: 370). According

[…] to translate Amazonian sociality or collectivity is 'conviviality', a term that can overlap in many respects with the earlier [previous to sociology] understanding of 'society' as amiable, intimate sets of relationships which carry, as well, a notion of peace and equality. Conviviality seems best to fit the Amazonian stress upon the *affective* side of sociality. […] Amazonian sociality could not be understood without paying attention to it, in that affect, and especially the establishment of a state of *convivial affect*, is what it is all about. The social, interactive, intersubjective side of Amazonian collectivity is there from the start, so much so that if relationships are not convivial, then there is no sociality […] (Overing and Passes 2000: 14, italics in original).

Arguing in a line similar to that developed by Overing and Passes, Rosengren (2006) also makes use of the concept of conviviality to interpret his experiences and ethnographic observations of the animism among the indigenous Matsigen people who live in the Peruvian Amazon. Starting from Philippe Descola and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, he seeks to demonstrate that the relations between spirits and humans he observed represent neither an instrumentalization of the humans by the spirits nor an instrumentalization of the spirits by the humans. According to Rosengren, these relations are horizontally structured, thus the Matsigen cosmogony conceives of a common origin for people, spirits and certain animals and plants. The distinction between these beings appeared later, when humans became tired of being immortal and asked the god Tasorinmas, the common creator, to make them mortal. Tasorinmas then cut the vine that connected the worlds of the spirits and the humans, making the humans mortal and therefore, subject to hunger and disease. The separation does not represent, however, a hierarchy between spirits and humans who can return to the condition of spirits if they are able to live according to the convivial ideas that shape the Matsigen ethos:

To achieve this goal [becoming a spirit] requires not only the repression of hierarchy but also the obliteration of structures of distinction in order to be consonant with the ideal of good living where mutual trust and the sharing of common assets are guiding principles. At this point, when individuals 'fuse' to become part of a community that straddles ontological borders, the present constitutive differences between humans and spirits are dissolved and humans return to the pristine conditions that once were lost (Rosengren 2006: 813-814).

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to this logic, the local economy is one of the spheres where the authors identify strong convivial relations, that is, those of cooperation.

2.6   Domesticating Conviviality

In an article originally published in 1992 and later integrated to a book that was born as a classic of post-colonial studies, "On the Postcolony" (Mbembe 2001), Cameroonian political scientist and historian Achille Mbembe developed a different interpretation of conviviality. Mbembe's central concern is to understand the structures of domination that were established in Africa both during colonialism and after national independences. He argues that Africa became integrated to modernity through the trafficking in African slaves. Since then, the continent and its inhabitants appear in the Western imaginary, Mbembe affirms, either as an expression of the absence of progress or as an hyperbolized representation of everything that is repulsive and abject.

The societies formed in the emancipated African nation states are marked, according to Mbembe, by a radical plurality that is not governed within the parameters of an ordered and legitimate political system. In this context, the authoritarian power (*commandement*) assumes an obscene and grotesque form. In a critical reading of Bakhtin's idea that the obscene and the grotesque are specific to the sphere of "ordinary people", Mbembe shows that in the Cameroonian post-colonial type of regime of domination the excessive and the obscene are a constitutive part of the rituals of domination established by the *commandement*. Power here is not something that is legitimated by rules or procedures and that is crystalized in institutions. To the contrary, power is exercised by the involvement of the masses in the public rituals and ceremonies that construct the *commandement* as fetish. The participation of ordinary people in these ceremonies is not marked by any aspiration to subvert or contest, as can be gathered from an interpretation guided by Bakhtin. To the contrary, these rituals establish the bond, at least in terms of meanings, between those who are subordinated and the actors who control power. It is to refer to this dissimulated familiarity between the sovereign and the subordinates that Mbembe applies the term conviviality:

> [...] in its desire for majesty, the popular world borrows the ideological repertoire of officialdom, along with its idioms and forms; conversely, the official world mimics popular vulgarity, inserting it at the core of the procedures by which it takes on grandeur. It is unnecessary, then, to insist, as does Bakhtin, on oppositions (*dédoublement*) or, as does conventional analysis, on the purported logic of resistance, disengagement, or disjunction. Instead, the emphasis should be on the logic of conviviality, on the dynamics of domesticity and familiarity, inscribing the dominant and the dominated within the same episteme (Mbembe 2001: 110).

In her work about domestic labour of non-documented migrants, Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez (2011), a sociologist at the University of Gießen, in Germany, also develops a concept of conviviality focussing on the tie between convivial relations and asymmetries of power.[8] For Gutiérrez Rodríguez (2011)[9], a domestic worker provides unpaid affective labour to people and environments in which she acts to the degree that her presence "contributes to the re-creation of the apartment as a space of potential conviviality". Gutiérrez Rodríguez's proposes the idea of "transversal conviviality" to articulate the interdependencies condensed in domestic labour (see also Wasser 2018). To make these interdependencies visible, Gutiérrez Rodríguez (2011) claims for *politics of affects*, understood as "a visionary political project emphasizing caring for ourselves as communal beings, embracing solidarity, responsibility, generosity and reciprocity."

3.   Conviviality-Inequality

The brief overview conducted thus far reveals the exponential growth of recent studies about conviviality, covering various fields of knowledge. The existing studies are also quite heterogeneous in terms of their theoretical ambitions. While some programs seek to develop new analytical frameworks in which there is no space for obsolete distinctions between disciplines and spheres of life, the intention of other contributions is more clearly political: to associate conviviality to the project of constructing societies that are more vigorous and solidary. The contributions share an emphasis on interdependence and interpenetration between processes, spaces and interactions that take place in distinct geographic and social contexts. Common to all the contributions is also the centrality conferred to daily relations in detriment to the macrostructural social relations.

From a normative perspective, there is a clear division between the group of contributions examined. With a single exception, all of the programs, whether *convivialisme, Konvivenz,* posthuman convivialities and fragile convivialities, even if they emphasize, in some cases, that conviviality also implies conflict and competition, also tend to emphasize the dimension of cooperation (at times symbiosis) inherent to conviviality. The sole exception is found in the domesticating conviviality program that emphasizes

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8   The affinity between the definition of conviviality adopted by Mbembe and Gutiérrez-Rodríguez may come from the effort in both cases to understand convivial relations through the multiple discussions of Hegel's dialectic of the master-slave. While Mbembe directly discusses Hegel's formulation, Gutiérrez-Rodríguez (2011) supports her work on Fanon's concept of "lived existence": "Reversing Hegel's dialectic of master/slave, Fanon insists on the 'lived experience' resulting from the relationship between the presupposed 'authentic Being' (the master) and the abjected Other, the 'non-Being' (the enslaved subject)." It can be inferred from this reading that for the author, in domestic labor, a non-documented migrant lives the experience of "non-beingness." Mbembe (2001: 182) refers to colonial violence as "the violence of being reduced to nothingness".

9   Page numbers are not available in this online publication.

the functionality of conviviality and social relations guided by affect and proximity to sustain asymmetries of power.

This normative bias in favour of "good conviviality" explains, at least in part, an important theoretical and analytical deficit found in the discussions about conviviality in the various fields of knowledge: the lack of attention to inequalities. It is not that inequalities are not mentioned. They emerge in various studies. They appear, however, as an empiric finding. Except for few exceptions, there is no conceptual elaboration about inequalities and their meaning for convivial relations.

The notion of conviviality that guides our own investigations is based on this critical assessment of the available bibliography. Firstly, conviviality refers to the relational dimension of social life, or simply life, depending on the field in question. That is, unlike concepts such as living together/cohabitation, *Zusammenleben/Miteinander*, *vivre ensemble/cohabitation*, *vida em comum/convivência*, which generically refer to shared life in its complete scope, conviviality refers specifically to the interactions observed in the realm of common life. They obviously include not only interactions based on cooperation but also those marked by competition, conflicts and violence. To specify that conviviality refers to interactions obviously does not imply affirming that convivial interactions take place in a vacuum and that the surroundings are not important. To the contrary, convivial interactions are inserted in the webs of interdependence that shape (social) life. This statement has certain methodological implications that will be discussed below.

Another premise is the inseparable nexus between conviviality and inequality. Even if it is empirically evident, the fact that conviviality always takes place in contexts marked by inequality is not trivial in its analytical consequences, given that it requires study of the specific nature of the relation between conviviality and inequality, in each particular context.

Inequality here refers to distances between the positions occupied by individuals or groups in the social hierarchies in relation to at least four levels:

i) The material level: this involves distances in terms of income, wealth or more generically, possession of objects or socially valued symbols.

ii) Power: inequalities or asymmetries of power refer to the distinct opportunities to shape one's own life and collective life according to one's own plans and interests. It therefore involves distances in the quality and effectiveness of current collective and individual rights and the possibilities to influence the formation of political will. The reference to distance between capacities and opportunities should not obfuscate the fact that power is always relational and contingent. That is, power is not an act of will of a person or group that possesses and mobilizes an arsenal of instruments and

resources to influence people. Guided by the tradition inaugurated by Elias (1971: 142-143) who, disagreeing with Weber, desubstantializes power, transforming it into a relational category (*Beziehungsbegriff*, Elias), power is not understood here as something that is possessed, but rather exercised or acquired in concrete interactions whose results always involve some unpredictability.

iii) Environment: given the mutual and interdependent constitution of nature and society, socio-ecological inequalities concern the consequences of the dominant forms of representing, transforming and appropriating nature for different individuals and groups (Dietz 2018).

iv) Episteme: Foucault (1980: 197) defines episteme as "the 'apparatus' which makes possible the separation, not of the true from the false, but of what may from what may not be characterised as scientific". Expanding this definition, we can define epistemological inequalities as differences in the ability to influence the processes that distinguish not the false from the true, but the knowledge recognized as valid and valuable from knowledge considered to be trivial or superfluous.

As a relationship, inequality, in the four levels mentioned above, assumes meaning and consequences in the realm of conviviality, that is, in the context of social interactions which, in turn, reflect existing inequalities. This is the basis of the inseparable nexus between inequality and conviviality: they are reciprocally constituted.

4.   Final Considerations: How to Study Convivial Figurations?

To study the interactional dimension of common life based on a relational and interdependent perspective requires methodological accuracy and also important challenges, beginning with the definition of the unit of observation or analysis. What is a suitable unit? A neighbourhood or an indigenous community, as in most studies on fragile convivialities? A corpus of specific texts as used by the authors linked to *Konvivenz,* or the entire planet, as the *convivialistes* prefer? These examples clearly show that the specific unit of reference to study conviviality varies for each case and individual study conducted.

Nevertheless, there are some common requirements for defining this unit of analysis. Given the relational perspective, the units cannot be previously defined based on geographic or political-administrative references (a country, a city, a village etc.) given that which web of relationships are relevant to shaping the conviviality observed is not known in advance. That is, the study of conviviality requires relational units that precisely allow adjusting the scope of the observation to the spectrum of the relationships relevant to each specific study. The unit chosen should also allow

incorporating relevant relations that are not face-to-face given that conviviality is also shaped by communications mediated by artefacts such as letters, telegraphs, telephones, computers, etc., obviously not including a few cases such as ethnic or religious groups that reject technological innovations or historic contexts in which communication technologies were still not available. In addition, the unit adopted should also permit the temporal flexibility to allow integrating a diachronic perspective to the study of conviviality. That is, even if the different programs analysed insist on the contingent and even fleeting character of convivial relations, conviviality is certainly not a-historic, it is historically constituted. This creates the need to develop tools to study the process of constitution and transformation of conviviality over time.

In addition to the unit of investigation, another important methodological aspect to be considered is the focus of analysis, given that the emphasis on relations and interdependence implies that the starting point are not actors or structures but the interactions themselves. When effectuated in its radicality, the relational and interdependent analysis first implies considering that actors do not exist prior to interactions, but are only constituted through them, and second, that structures and interactions are mutually constituted.

Before the recent group of studies characterized in their whole as a "relational turn" (Dépelteau 2013), it was Norbert Elias who, in the tradition of the social sciences, best explored and developed instruments for studying societies from a relational and interdependent perspective. Particularly suggestive and useful for our proposals is his category of *figuration.* Figuration is a resource that is simultaneously theoretical and methodological with which Elias seeks to mark his distance from both methodological individualism and structural-functionalism, since he affirms that these approaches represent the individual and society as "distinct and, moreover, antagonistic figures" (Elias 1971: 141). Figuration seeks to reconcile these figures separated by traditional sociology in order to emphasize the relations of interdependence, whether they are of cooperation or competition, between the various individuals. Working with the recurring image in his work of society as a game, Elias defines figuration as:

> a changing construction developed by the players not only with their intellect but with their whole person, acting and leaving others acting in their mutual relations. As we can see, figuration is tension field [*Spannungsgefüge*]. The interdependence among the players is the condition for them for building a specific figuration. Interdependence means both interdependence as allies and as adversaries. (Elias 1971: 142, own translation).

For Elias, as relational units of reference, figurations are flexible in scope and can refer to small groups or even entire societies in which millions of people are found linked

by interdependent ties. If we expand the concept of figuration to incorporate not only people but also other living beings, as well as spirits and artefacts involved in a single web of interdependence, we reach the definition of a unit of observation or analysis that is useful to the various investigations guided by the notion of conviviality – from the more anthropocentric studies to those decidedly guided by posthumanism.[10] After all, a figuration, or in our specific case a convivial figuration, is a relational and dynamic unit of reference that is constituted and adjusted during the research process. Convivial figurations can also circumscribe interactions that do not imply face-to-face contact and can be studied both from a synchronic or diachronic perspective. In addition, in figurations, the actors are not prior to the interactions studied but are constituted in the realm of the interactions – as are the structures. That is, structures only become real – in the sense of having practical effects – in the realm of the actions and relations of interdependence between the various participants of a figuration. In the image of the players, the structures are, for Elias, the game to which properties are attributed (such as good, slow, etc.) as if it had its own existence. It is obvious, however, that the game only exists to the degree to which people interact as players.

Convivial figurations are, by definition, dynamic, that is, they are found in a permanent process of reconfiguration and transformation. Considered from a perspective of a long duration, the convivial figurations know both diuturnal transformations as well as moments of inflection motivated by the accumulation of smaller transformations or by ruptures (catastrophe, revolution, radical institutional change, etc.) in the relationship between inequality and conviviality. To identify the different stages (pre- and post-inflection) with a single convivial figuration we refer to regimes. Thus, if the convivial figuration studied involves, for example, racial relations in South Africa, we would say that the end of apartheid marked a change in regime, given that the character of the nexus between inequality and conviviality changed. Combined, convivial figurations and convivial regimes constitute the nucleus of the methodological resources that we use to study the nexus between inequality and conviviality. As a whole, these resources allow studying the link between conviviality and inequality from a perspective that captures the historicity of (social) life and emphasizes the relations and interdependencies between: individuals and other individuals; individuals and society; society and nature; human and non-human entities; different regions of the world; and various forms of knowledge.

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10 Müller (2018b: 1) also refers in a very suggestive way to "figurations of conviviality". The reference, for this author, however, is not the sociology of Elias but his dialog with Caribbean writers and intellectuals.

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