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Towards a convivial economy? Theoretical perspectives and practical experience

by *Leonhard Anzinger*

Recently, debates on alternative forms of living together (con-vivere) have been invigorated by the concept of convivialism and particularly by the publication of the convivialist manifesto in 2013¹. Convivial practices aim at coexistence on a non-competitive basis, both within and beyond societies. Such practices involve searching for forms of prosperity without growth, allowing humans to take care of each other and of nature. It seems obvious that such a convivial society needs to be grounded on an alternative form of the economy; and such an economy, in turn, requires a different kind of society. It has to be explored, then, how the economy might be constructed in a way that is socially just and ecologically sustainable; what steps might lead to such a convivial alternative; and what roles civil society, the state, and business have to play.

On April 4 and 5, 2019, civil society experts and academics met in Hamburg to discuss these issues. The workshop was organised jointly by the University of Hamburg, Department for Socioeconomics, the Canopus Foundation, and the Maecenata Institute for Philanthropy and Civil Society.

The workshop brought together French proponents of convivialism with German representatives of alternative economic concepts to debate different alternatives of social organisation. After welcoming words from Frank Adloff (University of Hamburg) and Peter Heller (Canopus Foundation) the workshop started with a moderated discussion between Adalbert Evers (University of Heidelberg) and Lino Zeddies (Netzwerk Plurale Oekonomik) that centered around the question “What is (and how to study) the economy?”. The discussants agreed that the mainstream way of analysing the economy, the neoclassical school of economics, does not adequately describe the complexity of economic actions and structures and therefore offers poor guidance for solving the modern crises of capitalism. On the upside, alternative trends seem to be growing in popularity. Studies in behavioural economics for example show a movement away from the long-held image of economics as a form of natural science, leaning heavily on the mechanics of Isaac Newton, towards the social sciences. Organised forms of criticism, like the “Netzwerk Plurale Oekonomik” reach out to more people every day, which gives the impression that change is on the way.

Andrea Vetter of the Konzeptwerk Neue Oekonomie (KNÖ) was up next and introduced the concepts of Degrowth and Postgrowth as described in her recently published book. The main aims of the Degrowth movement are global justice, good life and stable institutions and infrastructures, which shows many parallels

¹ Frank Adloff / Claus Leggewie (eds.), *Das konvivialistische Manifest – Fuer eine neue Kunst des Zusammenlebens*. Bielefeld: Transcript 2014 / Frank Adloff / Volker M. Heins (eds.), *Konvivialismus. Eine Debatte*. Bielefeld: Transcript 2015.



to convivialism. She analysed seven forms of injustice, which the movement tries to overcome with different strategies. They are

- the gap between the global north and south,
- the class conflict rooted in capitalism,
- gender inequality,
- socio-economic injustice,
- ecological unsustainability, and
- problems of industrialism and cultural injustice.

Answers to these problems may be found in various degrowth policies (influenced by Eric Olin Wright):

- the democratisation of the economy,
- communing,
- convivial technologies, and
- a re-evaluation und redistribution of work, for example a short full time for everybody supported by a high standard of basic income or basic services.

When the growth paradigm is subjected to critical review, redistribution through maximum income or taxation of wealth and inheritance also become central topics. Even though Andrea Vetter saw no possibility of avoiding ecological disaster without giving up on the growth imperative of modern economies, in her answer to Frank Adloff's comment, she admitted that the claims made currently have a marginal stance in politics. The realisation of the degrowth paradigm would need strategic alliances with civic movements like the pro-growth 'green new deal', as suggested by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

Alain Caillé of the University of Paris X Nanterre, one of the founding fathers of convivialism, gave a lecture on his vision of a convivialist transformation of society. He started by noting that the central aspect of convivialism is the "-ism", as it points to a new way of thinking, a new political philosophy. He brought forward the main demands of the convivialist manifesto as first published and signed in 2013 by a group of French intellectuals. The convivialists aim at zero greenhouse gas emission, zero use of fossil fuels and zero environmental pollution with toxic waste. To reach these goals a process of deglobalization, democratization and decommodification is proposed as well as a fight

against inequality through universal basic income, an end of tax evasion and a maximum income for the wealthy. As neither the nation state, nor private companies show any interest in complying with those demands, the convivialists place their hope for change in civil society. Alain Caillé interpreted the current political crisis in France emphasising the movement of the *gilets jaunes*. This group shows some unusual peculiarities as they protest the state, asking for more state. The movement is the first large protest movement in France that is clearly anti-neoliberal without making explicit claims against neoliberal politics. Whereas the *gilets jaunes* are carried by a quarter of French society, the group of the precarious, they are supported by two other quarters, the group of the marginalised and the group of the integrated.

In Caillé's words, the central aim of the convivialist manifesto is the creation of a new narrative to convince these two groups to render possible profound reforms directed against the power of the neoliberal and globalized fourth quarter. He revealed the amendments due to be published in the second convivialist manifesto in response to the criticism and debate of the first, where the convivialists will take a stance on central philosophical questions. They reject the Cartesian dualism in favour of a common naturality and argue for humanity being part of nature and having a deeply interdependent relationship with it. In addition, they try to balance principles of communism, socialism, anarchism and liberalism, which all offer different approaches to the central societal problem of satisfying humanity's material needs. The strategy to achieve this synthesis is labelled 'mastering the opposition' and proposes guidelines to deal productively with dissent. Many political philosophies being born out of a spirit of emancipation, they strive for liberation from current masters. However, as soon as they gain their liberty, they themselves become oppressive and authoritarian. The convivialists therefore believe, that to break this circle of repression, a meta principle of a convivial society must control this hubris. In conclusion, Caillé turned to the present political situation in Europe and argued in support of a strong Europe, focussing on its core founding values. He underlined that promoting cohesion rather than nationalist separation was now more important

than ever and that the main ideas of the European Union continued to be peace, wealth and bypassing the old form of nation states, while admitting that the level of the nation state has so far been the only place where democracy has ever worked. Therefore, he proposed a new concept of a nation disconnected from language and ethnicity, a European meta-nation, or European republic, starting from Germany, France, Italy and Spain. Their common goals should be ecological transition, fighting tax evasion, and a convivial society, in order to become a beacon and make democracy desirable again.

The second day of the conference began with a panel on alternative business approaches, with a major focus on practical perspectives. Tim Goydke (Economy for the Common Good, Bremen) reflected on particular challenges (and solutions) for higher education institutions connecting to 'economy of the common good' standards. He shared insights from the International Graduate Centre of the Bremen University of Applied Sciences that uses the "common goods matrix" in order to assess impact on the environment and society. Experience shows that employee participation in the reporting processes is a key advantage, while tools for impact measurement need to be improved. All in all, the matrix has proven to be valuable in order to include the common good into reporting and auditing processes.

Heike Walk (Eberswalde University of Applied Sciences) emphasized linkages between convivialism and co-operatives. On one hand, co-operatives as a particular organizational form, with principles of democracy, participation, solidarity and education, are well suited for convivialist economic activities. On the other hand, especially in Germany, civil society actors have only rarely used the legal form of a co-operative for pursuing their aims and goals. Walk argued that the financial crisis and discourses of degrowth and socio-ecological transformation have reinvigorated the co-operative movement. Accordingly, civil society actors are rediscovering the economy as a field of action. Among others, new consumer co-operatives in rural areas and energy co-operatives highlight the role of co-operatives for the re-localization of the economy.

Next, Karl Birkhoelzer from the Berlin Technology Network shared insights from his rich practical experience with social enterprises. He too reminded the audience that the current economic system has drastically failed to satisfy basic material needs for many marginalised groups. As a reaction to growing inequality, Berlin for example has seen a rise in civil society organisations, which can best be described as economic self-help groups. However, they remain largely unnoticed as relevant economic actors, because of their widespread legal form as membership organisations. Birkhoelzer also pointed to various problems of organisation and management in social enterprises, e.g. the possibility of a deadlock in decision making due to the consensus principle. Finally, he criticised big umbrella organisations of social entrepreneurship like Ashoka, for following their own hidden neoliberal agenda.

The following paper was given by Geneviève Azam (University of Toulouse) under the heading "Economy and Sustainability". She began with the well-known fact that we, as a society, exhibit radically unsustainable economic practices. To her, the danger lies in an attitude of fatalism and cynicism that is widespread, especially in circles of the globalised oligarchy. This leads to a certain numbness and irrational herd behaviour, although the ecological catastrophe is imminent and unnegotiable. Moreover, even advocates of an ecological transformation shorten their critique to envisioning a kind of modernised 'green capitalism'. Thus, she continued, neoliberal thinking currently acts as both the source and the solution to growing ecological threats. A more sustainable economy would require radically questioning the predominance of neoliberal ideals. Azam referred to Ivan Illich, who coined the word 'conviviality' in 1973 and proposed long-term improvements through new forms of learning and cultural change. Today, Azam stated, there is no more time for slow transformation; the ecological threat is imminent. To overcome this threat, we should find inspiration from the care and reproduction-oriented thinkers of ecofeminism and the American anarchist Murray Bookchin. She also referred to the example of the native people of New Zealand, the Maori, who were successfully

granted lawful rights of protection to a river that is sacred to them. To overcome the dualism of humanity and nature, nature has to be an integral part of legislation. In closing, she referred to the recent hurricane in Puerto Rico, which destroyed most of the industrialised agriculture, whereas the traditional but less profitable eco-farms were better protected through trees and hills. "Convivialism does seem to have an ally in nature", she concluded.

François Schneider from the Spanish degrowth movement stressed the omnipresence of growth as a central narrative of capitalist societies. He also spoke out against pessimistic or even deterministic imaginations of future developments, as concepts of upcoming ecologic disaster (he suggested the term 'collapsology' for this) usually lead to numbness and inactivity. Furthermore, this narrative could strengthen anti-democratic groups. He encouraged immediate open and creative cooperation with other civil society actors, artists, theatres and authors. The final presentation was held by Christian Felber, central figure of the Economy for the Common Good (Gemeinwohloekonomie). Criticising the academic knowledge production, he claimed there are hardly any "universalists around", who could present a qualified overview of the present interdisciplinary crises networks. For Christian Felber, capitalism means the exact opposite from economy, as it originates from the Greek 'oikonomia' and refers to the satisfaction of needs, while modern economics, as a capitalist discipline, is oblivious of human needs. Whereas the economy was meant to be "the means to an end", the end of an ethically good life, this relation has been turned on its head. Furthermore, this contradicts almost all constitutions of the modern nations, as these explicitly state that the main goal of the economy is to serve the common good. Present mainstream teaching of economics may therefore be regarded as unconstitutional. On top of that, many modern economists see themselves as value-free academics, who simply describe the economy 'as it is', while in reality, they unconsciously import anti-values, e.g. limitless greed and other normative elements that had been strictly forbidden by almost all existing religions and philosophies. Concluding, he presented a common good balance sheet, that

adds ecological and social scores to the financial figures, to help companies in their management process of becoming centred on the common good, rather than on short-term profits.

The workshop ended with a thorough review of the content presented and discussed during the two days. The need for an umbrella organisation was discussed which could function as a kind of Anti-Mont-Pelerin-Society, though more transparent. Especially the links between German and French organisations should be strengthened, as they often pursue the same goals, but operate in isolation, due to closed discursive spheres. Also, the chances for strategic alliances with natural scientists, plural economists and civil society organisations were discussed. There was general agreement that theoretical differences between convivialism, degrowth, and 'Gemeinwohloekonomie' are but marginal. A central aim, therefore, should be to combine different currents and foster further cooperation.

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