Conviviality

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Origin and development of the concept

The term conviviality was introduced in the humanities and social sciences by the Austrian theologian and philosopher Ivan Illich in a book published in 1973 under the title *Tools for Conviviality*. At that time, Illich was the chair of CIDOC, the Intercultural Documentation Centre in Cuernavaca, Mexico, a centre for training Catholic missionaries, but which in fact functioned as a space for encounters and debates for progressive thinkers from Latin America and other regions of the world. Names such as Paulo Freire, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Susan Sontag, Erich Fromm and André Gorz passed through it.

The *tools for conviviality* explored in the book clearly reflect this context of international dialogue and are conceived as a critical response to human alienation within industrial capitalism. The book also represents a pioneering and emphatic warning against the disregard of environmental limits to economic growth. To counter the belief in capitalism’s unlimited expansion, Illich (1973:11) counterposes the notion of conviviality understood as an “autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment [...].”

In the last two decades, the *tools for conviviality* developed by Illich were rediscovered and have been mobilized and re-signified in various fields of knowledge and political praxis. Literary scholars use, for example, the notion of conviviality to refer to the multiple configurations of coexistence in groups marked by cultural, religious or other differences in novels. These pieces constitute, according to this strand, spaces of invention and experimentation with clear connections to real life. That is, there is not, according to this understanding, any rigid distinction between fiction and reality, both are connected and feed each other - mutually and fruitfully. Accordingly: “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 ‘reliable’ (Ette 2010: 62).

Illich’s work has also become a major influence on Convivialism, a political and theoretical movement that emerged in France about ten years ago around the sociologist Allain Caillé. Caillé is the main articulator of the first and second convivialist manifestos, published respectively in 2013 and 2020, which originate the formation of a Convivialist International. Based on the critique of economic growth as an end in itself, convivialism postulates that, given the limited natural resources available, societies in the global North need to radically reduce their consumption so that societies in the global South can meet their basic needs. Thus, if at the local level convivialism implies more fraternal and solidarity-based relationships, at the global level it implies a radical redistribution of wealth and available resources beyond national borders.

The tools of conviviality conceived by Illich also became a major inspiration for the broad field of interdisciplinary research known as post-human studies, which encompass a body of theories and empirical work that question anthropocentrism, that is, the idea that the human being is the main protagonist of what
happens on planet Earth. According to this reading, human beings, contrary to what the liberal ideology of individual autonomy preaches, are part of a network of interdependencies with other living beings (plants, animals, viruses, bacteria, etc.) and physical and chemical processes that constitute the web of life on the planet. Thus, it must be recognised that even cities, airports or industrial plants, from which human beings have vainly sought to banish nature, are ultimately multi-species entanglements. In this context, the ideology of human exceptionalism, that is, the belief that human beings will survive the subjugation and, in the limit, the destruction of other species, is seen as the root of the contemporary environmental and climate crisis, for which there is only one way out: to accept the primacy of conviviality among all living beings, both humans and non-humans (see among others: Chakrabarty 2021).

*Uses in the study of interethnic and intercultural relations*

The concept and theories of conviviality have been increasingly used in the study of interethnic relations in disciplines such as social anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies. In this context, conviviality, as a theory and analytical category, refers to concrete situations of interaction between people and groups and is generally studied at the micro-analytical level of a specific community or locality. In general, these studies have a normative bias, reserving the concept of conviviality only for cases in which interactions are marked by cooperation. Strictly speaking, however, the tension between cooperation and competition, often virulent and violent, is a necessary and inseparable feature of really existing convivial relations, so that the analytical use of theories of conviviality does not admit a prior distinction between an alleged “good conviviality” and conflictual conviviality.

This more analytical and less normative use of the term conviviality is widespread in the so-called anthropology of daily life, which has a privileged field of research in studies of indigenous sociabilities in the Amazonian region. Studies in this field start from the premise that sociology’s concept of society, with its obsolete distinction between community and society, agency and structure, affection and reason, is insufficient to capture Amazonian sociability built on the basis of interactions and ad-hoc arrangements articulated in specific situations. In this context, instead of referring to society, experts understand that “conviviality seems best to fit the Amazonian stress upon the affective side of sociality” (Overing/Passes 2000:14).

Another field in which important theories of conviviality have been employed to study interethnic relations concerns research in contexts marked by significant migratory flows. Introduced in Europe by the work of Paul Gilroy, this approach is now disseminated in various word regions. Here, conviviality functions as an antidote both against nationalist calls for the assimilation and integration of immigrants and their descendants and against the illusion of the separation of differences in multicultural arrangements. Against these perspectives, Gilroy claims that, in the migratory and post-migratory everyday life, differences have already mixed and coexist. In this context, conviviality takes the form of a “social pattern in which different metropolitan groups dwell in close proximity, but where their racial, linguistic and religious particularities do not [...]” (Gilroy 2006: 40). This does not imply ignoring that sexism, racism, xenophobia are still present both in everyday
relations and in institutions. However, it is irrefutable that in many interactions, whether in schoolyards, nightclubs, parks or workplaces, these segregationist ideologies no longer have the power to structure social relations.

An important warning against the idealisation of convivial interactions within asymmetrical power relations comes from the Cameroonian historian and political scientist Achille Mbembe (2001), who shows that the staging of close and friendly relations between oppressors and oppressed is a characteristic mark of colonial and postcolonial Africa. He also shows that without these forms of instrumentalisation of convivial relations, the domination of a minority over a majority would not have been possible throughout the history of the continent. A similar approach has also been used to study interethnic relations in the context of domestic and care service provision. In many countries, the informal and personal treatment of domestic workers - mostly immigrant, Afro-descendent or indigenous women - as supposed family members makes it possible to exploit not only their labour power beyond contractual limits but also the use of the free affective services (care, affection, etc.) that domestic workers provide to the families that employ them (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2010).

Starting from the tensions that mark conviviality in contexts of strong asymmetries, we have developed, within the framework of the Mecila Centre an analytical matrix, according to which conviviality and inequality are reciprocally constituted, that is, they are two sides of the same coin. Accordingly, really existing social interactions take place in contexts of inequalities (economic, power, epistemological, and ecological inequalities), and at the same time, inequality, as a relational category, only gains a concrete meaning in social interactions. That is, it is at the level of concrete interpersonal interactions that inequality is signified and acquires concrete implications for life in society (Costa 2019).

Transposed to a concrete study of racism in Latin America, this understanding of the interpenetration between conviviality and inequality implies recognizing that everyday relations are an essential space for reproducing existing inequalities between different ethnic-racial groups (see Góngora-Mera, Vera, Costa 2019). In this study, we researched inequalities between blacks and non-blacks (classified, depending on the country, as whites or mestizos while indigenous people are in a similar situation to blacks) in Brazil, Colombia and Ecuador. In the book, we sought to identify, beyond the myths of exceptionality reported and constructed by national historiographies, the links that connect the structures of inequality in the three countries. We were able to identify four regimes that, despite their internal heterogeneity and the temporal intersections between the different regimes, characterise, throughout history, the inequalities affecting African descendants in the three countries. They are: slavery (16th to 19th century), racist nationalism (about 1860s to 1920s), mestizaje (1930s to 1980s), neoliberal multiculturalism (since the 1990s).

Each of these regimes, in turn, contains four dimensions that complement each other: social structure, law and public policies, discourses, conviviality. What the study has shown is that everyday conviviality is a central arena of deepening, stabilising or renegotiating social inequalities between blacks and non-blacks in all regimes in the three countries. Thus, for example, in the regime characterized as racist nationalism, the
hardening of racist convivial practices together with the discourses of inferiorization of blacks legitimized by so-called scientific racism imported from Europe contributed to the stabilization of racial hierarchy at the moment when the abolition of slavery changed the legal status and formal position of blacks in the social structure. In the current multicultural regime, however, everyday relationships have become an important space for dispute and for achieving the equality guaranteed by law and public policies.

Final considerations

This entry sought to show how the theories of conviviality have been used in an incipient but growing way more general and particularly in the studies of interethnic relations both in the context of indigenous sociability, as in societies marked by recent migration, and also in the contexts marked by structural and everyday racism. The existing bibliography on conviviality still has a Eurocentric bias that is only gradually disappearing. New studies developed in Latin America and other regions of the Global South may consolidate this new field of studies that seeks to explore the links, evident but still little researched, between everyday relations and the structural asymmetries present in strongly hierarchical and unequal societies.

References

3. https://convivialism.org/