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Raúl Matta

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## Towards Convivial Foodscapes

Raúl Matta – full researcher (Institut Lyfe – Institut Lyfe Research and Innovation Center)



“Convivial” © Gabó Bartha, drawing on paper, 2022. Representation of an event at Terrapolis (Tarcál, Hungary), “[w]here the table meets and melts with the garden, plant, human, critters, stones” (<https://terrapolistarcál.blogspot.com/>)

As an analytical construct, conviviality has moved over past decades from its common definition as the quality of being friendly and making people feel welcome, to one encompassing radical alternatives to development and its fundamental connections to capitalist economy and ideology. This essay follows the progression of the concept from dining tables to multicultural cities, to the fields of design, the arts, and post-humanist thinking, while placing a focus on food. The goal of bringing conviviality and food together in this endeavor is twofold. First, an emphasis on food is helpful to operationalize conviviality as a concept that speaks about and champions holistic and interdisciplinary approaches addressing the interrelationship between culture, nature, politics, and the economy. Second, further-fusing this connection, it offers possibilities to unpack the transformative potential of more-than-human agencies existing within food environments. I would describe this short piece as a preliminary exercise in concrete (food) utopianism, with utopia referring to an impossibility that is only a function of existing arrangements within a system (Wilder 2022). My hope is that a convivial lens may nourish imagination and concur to activate “both a

capacity to identify transformative possibilities that may already exist but are not yet recognized and a capacity to imagine that which is currently unimaginable” (Wilder 2022: 10) within our food system.<sup>1</sup>

### **From tables to tools**

The term conviviality finds roots in two Latin words with two different meanings, *convivium* and *cumvivere*. *Convivium* means a banquet, a feast or a shared meal. *Cumvivere* means “to live with”. In quotidian use, it is the first meaning that has become preeminent. Conviviality is generally associated with “euphoric ideals” (Phull and al. 2015: 978) of sociability, friendliness and enjoyment spent around the table, over a long meal. It refers to a playful but planned association between individuals contributing to create a pleasurable atmosphere. Yet, conviviality is too often confused with commensality, which is broadly defined as the practice of eating together (Sobal 2000) or eating at the same table (Fischler 2011). The terms are used interchangeably as they prompt positive associations of shared meals and togetherness in people’s minds. In the social sciences of food, though, conviviality always conveys implicit notions of pleasure while commensality does not, as its social functions may also comprehend segregation and social division (Grignon 2001; Fischler 2011; Phull and al. 2015; Jönsson et al. 2021). Indeed, commensality reflects the way societies are constructed, with all its areas of commonality but also highlights clear differences and hierarchies. Conviviality, therefore, addresses less the act of eating together along with its sensorial and social implications, than the enjoyment of food sociability itself (Starck and Matta 2022). Georg Simmel (1997) has defined sociability as the playful and democratic association in which an individual’s pleasure is dependent on the joy of others. This implies that the individuals participating in the interaction are interdependent and deprived of any specific trait that may create imbalance and threaten the pleasurable situation. Consequently, for a dining situation to be sociable, friendly and, thus, convivial, those present must be motivated by a collective aspiration for affability and jovialness. Additionally, they must all comply with the rules of sociable interactions established for that specific context. The host, as explained by 19th-century food writer Grimod de la Reyniere (1968), needs knowledge both of people and food to play the crucial role of recruiting those who will be at the table. That aspect of conviviality has prompted understandings which emphasize a certain degree of social homogeneity or the sharing of a *habitus* in the sense of Bourdieu (1979), thus circumscribing the concept within social contexts characterized not by necessity or obligation but by choice and intent. That might explain why food studies scholars consider conviviality only as a possible configuration of commensality (Medina 2021), one which corresponds with the uses and customs of middle-class and privileged groups. Such an emphasis on *habitus* obstructs views of conviviality as sustained and proactive social practices which, with minimal rules, might function as a sort of social lubricant –and therefore independent from social homogeneity or sameness. However, as its overwhelming connotations of leisure and sociability have remained unchallenged, conviviality has evolved within food studies not as a serious concept compared to commensality, but rather as a cultural ideal.

Interestingly, despite its widespread food-related connotations, the concept of conviviality has gained more scholarly attention outside food culture, especially regarding issues of migration and cultural difference. This body of work focuses on the second Latin meaning of the term: *cum vivere*, or the capacity of living together. This take on conviviality addresses the challenges of intercultural

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance, the article by Léo Mariani and Tania Roser in this “Atelier”.

relations in our increasingly globalized world, and the consequences this has for local relations of cohabitation whether in a town, city or even country (Gilroy 2004; 2006). As shown in various disciplines of the social sciences and the humanities, current usages of conviviality “convey a deeper concern with the human condition and how we think about human modes of togetherness” (Nowicka and Vertovec 2014: 342). The multicultural city is the main laboratory in which this understanding of conviviality unfolds, as it provides not only circumstances and conditions where people and their social and cultural backgrounds negotiate togetherness, but also opportunities for defining or designing optimal settings to experience the “with” dimension of existence (Lapina 2016).

The latter normative dimension is central among most approaches to conviviality. Ivan Illich who, in his book *Tools of Conviviality* (1973), develops one of the most influential proposals around the notion, suggests that social “tools” (be they ideas, machines or institutions) could be shaped in ways that contribute to coexisting and compatible lives in complex social systems. In Illich’s thought, conviviality adopts a programmatic connotation which draws on a radical critique of industrial capitalism, human alienation, and the environmental degradation that derives from it. In opposition to this, he defines conviviality both as the “autonomous and creative intercourse among persons and the intercourse of persons with their environment”, where intercourse indicates intense and widespread interaction and engagement, and the “individual freedom realized in personal interdependence” (1973: 11). The emphasis Illich puts on “tools” (i.e. tools of communication such as the telephone or the bicycle) as facilitators of interaction and democratization implies, invariably, the definition of material settings, specific environments, and guidelines to ensure societal success. Conviviality becomes therefore a holistic project in which humans, natural and artificial environments strive together to positively change the quality of human relations (Whatmore and Hinchcliff 2010).

Urbanists, designers, architects, and activists have had extensive recourse to this socio-material approach of conviviality, in particular to tackle challenges posed by increased human migration and displacement. In the following I provide three short examples of this. One was the workshop “Cultivating Conviviality”, carried out in 2017 and 2018 at the *École nationale supérieure des arts décoratifs de Paris*. The workshop was part of the EU-funded project “4Cs: From Conflict to Conviviality through Creativity and Culture”, with “Conviviality” referring to the objective of bringing “individuals together within a model of intercultural dialogue, mutual recognition, and equal participation”.<sup>2</sup> The event aimed at highlighting and integrating the social, political, and cultural references of migrants (both long-term inhabitants and newcomers), in solving conflict situations through design methodologies. Students, experts, activists, artists, and designers, together with migrants, conceptualized what they called “new tools of conviviality”, in direct reference to Illich’s book. These tools ranged from objects to modular structures to entrepreneurial endeavors, all intended to improve the quality of life of migrants, while fostering the latter’s specific knowledge and skills. Many of the objects and solutions that came together involved food businesses and shared commensality, as food became central to initiatives targeting urban poverty and social exclusion (Food Relations 2018; Marovelli 2019).

In Germany, the projects REFUEAT and Kitchen on the Run pursued similar purposes in similar ways (Starck and Matta 2022). REFUEAT is a catering business in which the employees, all Syrian refugees, use bicycle-propelled kitchen trailers especially designed to travel over Berlin’s

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<sup>2</sup> <https://4cs-conflict-conviviality.eu/project>

roads, which set up portable grill stalls at public events and private occasions. The food bikes are equipped with everything needed to prepare fresh food outdoors, such as ingredients, pans, and deep fryers, as well as washing bowls and a portable pavilion. Aided by a small electric motor which supports the weight of the heavy trailer, the REFUEAT staff pedal throughout most of the city. The food bikes challenge the political and urban structures that organize and regulate the public space formally, which make employment and inclusion difficult for people who fled their countries. To sell food for REFUEAT in the streets of Berlin, refugees do not need advanced German skills or a driver's license. At the same time, via the catering activities, the workers learn how to navigate and inhabit the public space within their new home, and to interact with locals. The mobile materiality of the bikes and the object's own "affordances" (Gibson 1979) enable refugees to exercise citizenship, as the REFUEAT staff is given the opportunity not only to be integrated into the social fabric of Berlin but also to become part of its very making. The food bikes approach what designer and activist Andrea Vetter (2018) has termed "convivial technologies" as their characteristics of "adaptability" (to the urban landscape of Berlin), "bio-interaction" (with edible elements and humans), and "appropriateness" (the bikes are easy to repair and nonpolluting) promote more equality for people and less harm for the environment.



A colored food bike on the streets of Berlin. © Raúl Matta and Edda Starck, 2019



At the destination, the bicycle trailer is converted into a kitchen stall. © Raúl Matta and Edda Starck, 2019

Kitchen on the Run is an organization which aims at building community among people of different cultural backgrounds –locals, migrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers alike. It uses a shipping container with built-in kitchen which travels across Germany (and previously other countries), sojourning for five weeks in small towns and cities to host cooking events bringing refugees and locals together. The container transforms into a fully equipped kitchen with a mountable wooden terrace and an open shelf system tailored to fit cookery objects, its visibility minimizing any potential unease people might feel when cooking in an unfamiliar kitchen and facilitating tidying up at the end of events. Hopes are put on the container to leave affective reverberations in its passage. In the best-case scenario, it would create an enduring “cooking community” which continues to gather. The Kitchen on the Run team pursues this goal through planning meetings in which the staff and potential volunteers discuss and are encouraged to become active members of their community through cooking. At the meeting I attended, participants received a booklet titled “Cook, Eat, Meet, Repeat”, which included guidelines and templates to help volunteers to set up events after the passage of the container. Kitchen on the Run (and not only the container) can therefore be considered as a convivial tool in the sense characterized by Illich, which is not restricted to objects and technologies in a narrow sense, but refers to rationally designed institutions of every kind that “give each person who uses them the greatest opportunity to enrich the environment with the fruits of his or her vision” (1973: 34).



“The fat blue one”, a large, blue container arrived in Germany from China © Raúl Matta and Edda Starck, 2022



The kitchen space inside the container is designed to be welcoming and easy to navigate. © Raúl Matta and Edda Starck, 2022

Although the two initiatives suggest that food and objects, and their materialities, can positively influence relations marked by difference, they cannot be apprehended as comprehensive solutions to the challenges of social inclusion and forced migration. Rather, they must be appreciated as more-than-human orchestrations which facilitate relational and affective

experiences holding the potential of reducing social anxieties and isolation, and therefore of bringing about new possibilities of being in the world. Whether these possible positive outcomes are realized is something that will always remain unclear, as convivial orchestrations are precarious and unpredictable by nature, for the impetus forces rely in good part on the responsibility of individuals and the extent of their engagement with their surroundings. Although these examples of assemblages and convivial tools highlight the enhance interaction and interdependency of people and their material and living environments, they nonetheless operate in a form of conviviality which remains human-centered.

### **Thinking outside the (tool) box**

The arts, too, have been very active in conceptualizing conviviality. For instance, the notion was at the core of the series of lectures and discussions held at the 2012 contemporary art exhibition dOCUMENTA (13). In their account of the events, Nowicka and Vertovec (2014) underscore the centrality of the notion of “worlding” as inspired by new materialism (Stewart 2010; Haraway 2016). Worlding refers to the capacity of making new worlds by placing particular attention on places, events, encounters and experiences, while actively engaging with the materiality and context of the situation (Palmer and Hunter 2018). Worlding is therefore an invitation to imagine new life by ceasing to see things as usual. Interestingly, the artists, curators and cultural critics participating in the debates, applied worlding qualities both to the notion of conviviality and to the exhibition itself. This occurred when they equated conviviality and dOCUMENTA (13) “in the sense [the exhibition] invites all kinds of people to take time, get affected by the environment and co-create the space and situation for togetherness to happen” (Nowicka and Vertovec 2014: 347) albeit recognizing the impossibility of controlling how togetherness comes about. Indeed, although the arrangements and dispositions mediated by art objects and other factors “produce a sense of ‘more than’”, this “‘more than’ is not something that can be replicated in a programmatic way because they are the result of complex assemblages (Wise and Velayutham 2014: 425).”

The relational and transformative qualities of conviviality are also present in artistic initiatives which do not make explicit reference to the notion. In April 2016 I was invited by the NGO for cultural affirmation Waman Wasi to participate in a three-day workshop in the town of Lamas, in the Peruvian Amazon, along with local people, artists, researchers and activists. The event was one of a series of workshops conducted across the world with the objective of guiding thoughts leading up to the 32<sup>nd</sup> Biennial exhibition of São Paulo. The theme of the exhibition, INCERTEZA VIVA (Living Uncertainty), looked at notions of uncertainty and the strategies offered by contemporary art to embrace or inhabit uncertainty. Such an approach builds on the conviction that, in order to confront the big questions of our time, from climate change to the loss of biological and cultural diversity, to global migration and the resultant spread of xenophobia, it is necessary to detach uncertainty from fear. Admitting uncertainty includes processes of unlearning and requires an understanding of the boundless nature of knowledge. As participants in the workshop, we were immersed into relevant knowledge that makes life and survival possible for Amazonian communities. Food played a preeminent role in our activities. Through learning about local food practices ranging from food-as-medicine, to commensality, to traditional agricultural knowledge, we explored possibilities of establishing relationships of respect with the living environments surrounding us. This required accepting the idea that human, natural and more-than-human worlds influence one another reciprocally and move along together, in symbiosis. Convivial relations here expand beyond the human realm to encompass world representations within material planetary limits. Participating in the workshop involved questioning what we take for

granted, opening perspectives to learn from the lived experiences of others, and considering scientific and symbolic modes of thought as complementary rather than exclusionary. In sum, the event invited participants to become implicated in new worlding practices, pay attention to and embrace the “divergent, layered and conjoined projects that make up worlds” (Tsing 2015: 22). By encouraging engaged participation and interaction, the workshop turned into a convivial platform which allowed for the co-creation of alternative narratives of co-existence.



Women preparing medicinal herbs. Workshop Incerteza Viva, Lamas, 2016. © Raúl Matta



Food sharing event. Workshop Incerteza Viva, community Anak Churuyaco Valisho, 2016. © Raúl Matta



Man preparing *sangre de grado* tea from the resin of the *Croton lecheri* tree. Workshop Incerteza Viva, Lamas, 2016. © Raúl Matta

In a constant search for environments which foster harmonious coexistence, conviviality carries programmatic and (as minimal as possible) normative dimensions. Dealing with the fragility, precariousness and indeterminacy of encounters with difference is an achievement that requires both negotiation and consistent, sustained effort (Given 2022).

In recent years, conviviality has inspired theorizations and projects in political ecology (mainly through the concept of convivial conservation) which promote grassroots, democratic decision-making about environmental issues, while emphasizing strong interdependencies between humans and the environment (Given 2013; 2018; Büscher and Fletcher 2019, 2020; Krauss 2021, Manzi 2020). These developments advocate for a radical re-imagination of our relationship to biodiversity in current times of extinction crises and propose modes of operation to transcend the unsustainable present situation (Büscher and Fletcher 2019). In the following, I build on a similar holistic approach to conviviality to explore and lay down some elements for an inclusive critique of approaches of sustainability in food.

### **Conviviality, food, and landscapes of correspondence: towards convivial foodscapes**

The food system is experiencing a multiple crisis in which global trade, network disruptions, conflict, malnutrition, and climate change are jeopardizing human and planetary health (Hamant 2022; Lähde et al. 2023). Most research and action to address these challenges build upon mainstream ideas of sustainability resting on a vision of the world that separates humans from non-humans and “culture” from “nature”, the latter encompassing biodiversity and ecosystems. By focusing extensively on the management of ecosystems as resources to maintain the human way of life in modern society, conventional sustainability, such as that promoted by the pundits of sustainable development and green development, has failed to account for nature’s own thresholds, the interdependent character of economic, social, and environmental systems (Fairley and Smith 2014).

We urgently need a vision which expresses the necessary drastic changes in how edible biodiversity is addressed. Here I contend that conviviality, when associated to the concept of foodscapes, offers a perspective shift towards reconnecting people to their ecosystems and to unfolding the unprecedented possibilities which may derive from it. Yet, this is only possible by opening the field of intervention, commonly circumscribed to experts, to encourage multisectoral and civil involvement against the degradation of our edible environments. Bringing conviviality and foodscapes together aligns with research and practices promoting the revitalization of traditional food cultures, local markets, and short food supply chains as counterweights to policies which place hope in global trade and green-washed climate policies to solve the world's food crises and supports explorations of alternate understandings of food sustainability (Altieri and Nicholls 2005; Bricas et al. 2021; Foyer et al. 2020; Matta 2019; Pilgrim et al. 2010; Paturel and Ndiaye 2022).

Framed within this backdrop, conviviality offers additional meaning and purpose. Conviviality encompasses principles of equity, interdependence, mutual respect for one another and the natural world, and the assumption of joint responsibility for the ways in which we live and engage. This implicates cultivating human attention and wisdom to “correspond” with other beings (Hamant 2022; Ingold 2023). Correspondence here denotes “the process by which beings or things literally answer to one another over time” not in the desire to know more about the other beings or things, “but to become better acquainted with” them and get along together (Ingold 2023: 31-32). In this view, conviviality postulates that “to be is always to be-with” (Boisvert 2010).

Rooted in an ethics of communality, reciprocity, and care, conviviality posits human and non-human as inherently entangled in networks and relations which strive for both their individual and common existence. Such an interdependence bond entails a dynamic similar to that defined as *crianza mutua* (mutual nurturing) in Andean scholarship (Grillo *et al.* 1994) and more recently as “politics of mutual enhancement” in North American research (Linton 2019). What all of them share is a common commitment with struggles for vitality and revitalization “in shifting terrains of belonging and exclusion in multispecies communities”<sup>3</sup>. Conviviality, therefore, brings attention to the complex and changing connections and interdependencies that constitute life, while acknowledging that inequality, conflict, negotiation, indifference, and dependency are as much part of convivial relations as mutualism and collaboration (Given 2013, 2018; Costa 2019; Cravero 2021). This does not suggest that all species, entities, and animated forces are equal –indeed, “[w]e feed and are fed, we eat and are eaten” (Given 2022: 4)– but rather to acknowledge the asymmetries between them so to bridge the divide between different ways of knowing and experiencing the world (Haraway 2008).

The convivial critique of food sustainability becomes more concrete when conviviality connects with the concept of foodscapes. Foodscapes refer to the physical, social, and symbolic environments wherein food-related practices, values, and representations intersect with the material realities that sustain the relationships people have with food (Dolphijn 2004; Goodman 2016; Johnston and Goodman 2015). Foodscapes are “perspectival constructs, inflected by the historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different sorts of actors” (Appadurai 1996: 33) which contribute to situate the lives of groups and individuals in the world, both in tangible and imaginary ways. Pushing further the role of imagination, the reading I propose for this term does not refer to a stable landscape of food encompassing a collection of things and designed spaces

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<sup>3</sup> <https://perc.ac.nz/wordpress/conviviality/>

that determine the food practices of a particular population. Foodscapes here rather designate a “practised formation of living”, where beings and things are encountered in “passionate, intimate and material relationships” (Lorimer 2004: 85) with edible matter. Tactics, explorations, experiments, and multi-sensual engagements are central to a view of foodscapes as environments that are mutually constitutive, compassionate and cooperative, yet also conflictual and contested. Indeed, since ideas of food “necessarily concern the transformations of individual bodies and environments, the technologies to realize these and the social and cultural complexities this enables” (Dolphijn and Amilien 2020: 5), foodscapes can solely be apprehended via negotiations.

Framed as a relational and dynamic way of being, conviviality not only provides prisms through which to examine the multiple entities, processes, materials, symbols, and conditions which constitute foodscapes, as well as their current configurations. It also provides the possibility to intervene effectively and affectively on these elements and, through negotiations, open up possibilities for alternative action, and shape potential outcomes. Convivial endeavors in the realm of food may find a fertile ground in, among others: posthumanist critiques that reorient conviviality towards deep interdependences with agricultural landscapes and experiences of soil (Given 2018; Tickell 2020); writings, visual and performing arts that describe, convey, and narrate potentialities in the realm of food, agriculture, and multispecies relations in edible contexts (Schwartzberg 2019; Bosse et al. 2020); kitchen and food production work that sees human and non-human (animals, plants, water, bacteria, objects, etc.) not solely as edible matter or resource, but as associates that work in cooperation – e.g. fermented foods, or transforming invasive species into food (Donati 2014, Evans and Lorimer 2021); grassroots projects in which local communities work together to co-create possibilities for regaining control of their foods and agricultural environments; or in new models of food sharing which may include exercises on intentional commensality, and novel practices which can be mediated by diverse tools.

This combination of conviviality and foodscapes, which we can refer to as “convivial foodscapes”, can pave the way for a twofold critique of sustainability. The first addresses what critics of sustainability call its cultural deficit; meaning that academic humanists, civil society, local communities, artists, and cultural workers have not been central to discussions on what sustainability is and might be. The second offers an invitation to rethink our relationship to food, the environment, and the living world.

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