

Universal convivialism or communal conspiratio?

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Blog de Pierre Nicolas

Dépasser les conflits inutiles



Convivialism is in search of a new **paradigm** which could free us from our present tendencies towards unbearable levels of social and natural destruction.

Well, before venturing into new territories, it is wise to check the direction given by the compass. For Convivialists, it inspires a return to Ivan Illich (1926-2002), the polymath who promoted the concept of “conviviality”.

Here is one of his last (1998) and most inspiring speeches: “*The cultivation of conspiracy*”. Although he does not explicitly mention « *conviviality* », the references he assembles draw a precise description of this key human experience (to be considered as both a goal and a way), as well as of the criteria which tell us if we are still on track.



Take a look at these extracts from the full text given below...

[...] a mutual trust flowering into a commitment to friendship.

[...] I wanted first to dismantle any universal notion of peace; I wanted to stress the claim of each ethnos to its own peace, the right of each community to be left in its peace. It seemed important to make clear that peace is not an abstract condition, but a very specific spirit to be relished in its particular, incommunicable uniqueness by each community.

[...] I argued that only by de-linking *pax* (peace) from development could the heretofore unsuspected glory hidden in *pax* be revealed.

[...] In the Christian liturgy of the first century [...], *conspiratio*, the mouth-to-mouth kiss, became the solemn liturgical gesture by which participants in the cult-action shared their breath or spirit with one another. It came to signify their union in one Holy Spirit, the community that takes shape in God's breath. The *ecclesia* came to be through a public ritual action, the *liturgy*, and the soul of this liturgy was the *conspiratio*. Explicitly, corporeally, the central Christian celebration was understood as a co-breathing, a conspiracy, the bringing about of a common atmosphere, a divine milieu.

Conspiratio became the strongest, clearest and most unambiguously somatic expression for the entirely non-hierarchical creation of a fraternal spirit in preparation for the unifying meal. Through the act of eating, the fellow conspirators were transformed into a "we", a gathering which in Greek means *ecclesia*. Further, they believed that the "we" is also somebody's "I"; they were nourished by shading into the "I" of the Incarnate Word. The words and actions of the liturgy are not just mundane words and actions, but events occurring after the Word, that is, after the Incarnation. Peace as the commingling of soil and waters sounds cute to my ears; but peace as the result of *conspiratio* exacts a demanding, today almost unimaginable intimacy.

[...] The principal condition for an atmosphere that is propitious to independent thought is the hospitality cultivated by the host: a hospitality that excludes condescension as scrupulously as seduction; a hospitality that by its simplicity defeats the fear of plagiarism as much as that of clientage; a hospitality that by its openness dissolves intimidation as studiously as servility; a hospitality that exacts from the guests as much generosity as it imposes on the host.

That said, should « *Radical Convivialists* » now call themselves « *Conspirators* » ? Although it will attract attention, I believe it's not a good idea!

Convivialism is not a universalism, it does not aspire to power.

As defined by Ivan Illich, it stresses "the claim of each ethnos to its own peace. [...] Peace is not an abstract condition".

Ivan Illich – The Cultivation of Conspiracy

Address given by Ivan Illich at the Villa Ichon in Bremen, Germany, on the occasion of receiving the Culture and Peace Prize of Bremen, March 14, 1998.

Challenging the goods of socio-economic development

[...] **Learned and leisurely hospitality** is the only antidote to the stance of deadly cleverness that is acquired in the professional pursuit of objectively secured knowledge. I remain certain that the quest for truth cannot thrive outside **the nourishment of mutual trust flowering into a commitment to friendship**. Therefore I have tried to identify the

climate that fosters and the “conditioned air” that hinders the growth of friendship. Of course I can remember the taste of strong atmospheres from other epochs in my life: I have never doubted that – today, more than ever – a **“monastic” ambience** is the prerequisite to the independence needed for a historically based indictment of society. Only the gratuitous commitment of friends can enable me to practice **the asceticism required for modern near-paradoxes**: as that of renouncing systems analysis while typing on my Toshiba.

My early suspicion that **atmosphere** was a prerequisite for the kind of studium to which I had dedicated myself became a conviction through my contact with post-Sputnik American universities. After just one year as vice-chancellor of a university in Puerto Rico, in 1957, I and a few others wanted to question the development ideology to which Kennedy no less than Castro subscribed. I put all the money I had – today the equivalent of the prize you just gave me – into the purchase of a one room wooden shack in the mountains that overlook the Caribbean. With three friends I wanted a place of study in which **every use of the personal pronoun “nos-otros” would truthfully refer back to the four of “us”**, and be accessible to our guests as well; I wanted to practice the rigor that would keep us far from the “we” that invokes the security found in the shadow of an academic discipline: we as “sociologists”, “economists” and so forth. As one of us, Charlie Rosario, put it: “All departments smell – of disinfectants, at their best; and poisoned sterilized aura.” The “casita” on the route to Adjuntas soon became so obnoxious that I had to leave the Island.

This freed me to start a “thinkery” in Mexico that five years later turned into CIDOC (*Centro Intercultural de Documentación*). In his introductory talk for today’s celebration congressman Freimut Duve told you about it. In those distant years, Duve was editor at Rowohlt, took care of my German books and several times spent time with me there, in Cuernavaca. He told you about the spirit prevailing in that place: **a climate of mutually tempered forbearance**. It was this aura, this quality or air, through which this ephemeral venture could become a world crossroads, a meeting place for those who, long before this had become fashionable, **questioned the innocence of “development”**. Only the mood that Duve hinted at can explain the disproportionate influence that this small place exerted in **challenging the goods of socio-economic development**

Philia

CIDOC was closed by common accord on April first, ten years to the day after its foundation. With Mexican music and dancing we celebrated its closing. Duve told you about her, who did it, Valentina Borremans: she had directed and organized CIDOC from its inception, and he told you about his admiration for the style in which she closed it by mutual consent of its 63 collaborators. She knew that the soul of this free, independent and powerless “thinkery” would have been squashed soon by its rising influence.

CIDOC shut its doors in the face of criticism by its most serious friends, people too earnest to grasp the paradox of atmosphere. These were mainly persons for whom the hospitable atmosphere of CIDOC had provided a unique forum. They thrived in the aura of CIDOC, and outright rejected our certainty that atmosphere invites institutionalization by which it will be corrupted. **You never know what will nurture the spirit of *aphilia*, while you can be certain what will stifle it. Spirit emerges by surprise, and it’s a miracle when it abides; it is stifled by every attempt to secure it; it’s debauched when you try to use it.**

Few understood this. With Valentina I opened the mayor's bottle of Burgundy in Mexico to celebrate one of them. We drank the wine to the memory of Alejandro Del Corro, a now deceased Argentine Jesuit who lived and worked with me since the early sixties. With his Leica, he travelled around South America, collaborating with guerilleros to save their archives for history. Alejandro was a master at moderating aura. When he presided, his delicate attention to each guest: guerillero, US civil servant, trash collector or professor felt at home with each other around the CIDOC table. Alejandro knew that you cannot lay a claim on aura, he knew about the evanescence of atmosphere.

Don't imagine you can be friends with people you can't smell

I speak of **atmosphere**, "faute de mieux". In Greek, the word is used for the emanation of a star, or for the constellation that governs a place; alchemists adopted it to speak of the layers around our planet. Maurice Blondel reflects its much later French usage for *bouquet des esprits*, the scent those present contribute to a meeting. I use the word for something frail and often discounted, the air that weaves and wafts and evokes memories, like those attached to the Burgundy long after the bottle has been emptied.

To sense an *aura*, you need a nose. The nose, framed by the eyes, runs below the brain. What the nose inhales ends in the guts; every yogi and hesichast knows this. The nose curves down in the middle of the face. Pious Jews are conscious of the image because what Christians call "*walking in the sight of God*" the Hebrew expresses as "*ambling under God's nose and breath.*" To savor the feel of a place, you trust your nose; to trust another, you must first smell him.

In its beginnings, western civic culture wavered between cultivated distrust and sympathetic trust. Plato believed it would be upsetting for Athenian citizens to allow their bowels to be affected by the passion of actors in the theater; he wanted the audience to go no further than reflecting on the words. Aristotle respectfully modified his teacher's opinion. In the *Poetics*, he asks the spectators to let gesture and mimicry, the rhythm and melody of breath, reach their very innards. Citizens should attend the theater, not just to understand, but to be affected by each other. For Aristotle, there could be no transformation, no purifying catharsis, without such gripping mimesis. **Without gut level experience of the other, without sharing his aura, you can't be saved from yourself.**

Some of that sense of mimesis comes out in an old German adage, "*Ich kann Dich gut riechen*" (I can smell you well), which is still used and understood. But it's something you don't say to just anyone; it's an expression that is permissible only when you feel close, count on trust, and are willing to be hurt. It presupposes the truth of another German saying, "*Ich kann Dich gut leiden*" (I can suffer [put up with] you [well]). You can see that nose words have not altogether disappeared from ordinary speech, even in the age of daily showers.

I remember my embarrassment when, after years of ascetical discipline, I realized that I still had not made the connection between nose and heart, smell and affection. I was in Peru in the midfifties, on my way to meet Jaime, who welcomed me to his modest hut for the third time. But to get to the shack, I had to cross the Rimac, the open cloaca of Lima. The thought of sleeping for a week in this miasma almost made me retch. That evening, for some reason, I suddenly understood with a shock what Carlos had been telling me all

along, “Ivan, don’t kid yourself; **don’t imagine you can be friends with people you can’t smell.**” That one jolt unplugged my nose; it enabled me to dip into the aura of Carlos’s house, and allowed me to merge the atmosphere I brought along into the ambience of his home.

This discovery of my nose for the scent of the spirit occurred forty years ago, in the time of the DC-4, belief in development programs, and the apparently benign Peace Corps. It was the time when DDT was still too expensive for Latin American slum dwellers, when most people had to put up with fleas and lice on their skins, **as they put up with the old, the crippled and idiots in their homes.** It was the time before Xerox, fax and e-mail. But it was also a time before smog and AIDS. I was then considered a crank because **I foresaw the unwanted side effects of development,** because I spoke to unions on technogenic unemployment, and to leftists on the growing polarization between rich and poor in the wake of expanding commodity dependence. What seemed hysteria then has now hardened into well documented facts; some of these facts are too horrible to face. They must be exorcised: bowdlerizing them by research, assigning their management to specialized agencies, and conjuring them by prevention programs. But while the depletion of life forms, the growing immunity of pathogens, climate changes, the disappearance of the job culture, and uncontrollable violence now make up the admitted side effects of economic growth, **the menace of modern life for the survival of atmospheres is hardly recognized as a terrible threat.**

This is the reason I due to annoy you with the memory of that walk in the dusk with my nose full of the urine and feces emanating from the Rimac. That landscape no longer exists; cars now fill a highway hiding the sewage. The skin and scalp of Indians is no longer the habitat of lice; now the allergies produced by industrial chemicals cause the itch. Makeshift shanties have been replaced by public housing; each apartment has its plumbing and each family member a separate bed – the guest knows that he imposes an inconvenience. The miasma of the Rimac has become a memory in a city asphyxiated by industrial smog.

I juxtapose then and now because this allows me to argue that the impending loss of spirit, of soul, of what I call atmosphere, could go unnoticed.

Only persons who face one another in trust can allow its emergence. The bouquet of friendship varies with each breath, but when it is there it needs no name.

Peace

For a long time, I believed that there was no one noun for it, and no verb for its creation. Each time I tried one, I was discouraged; all the synonyms for it were shanghaied by its synthetic counterfeits: mass-produced fashions and cleverly marketed moods, chic feelings, swank highs and trendy tastes. Starting in the seventies, group dynamics retreats and psychic training, all to generate “atmosphere”, became major businesses. Discreet silence about the issue I am raising seemed preferable to creating a misunderstanding.

Then, thirty years after that evening above the Rimac, I suddenly realized that there is indeed a very simple word that says what I cherished and tried to nourish, and that word is **peace.** Peace, however, not in any of the many ways its cognates are used all over the

world, but peace in its post-classical, European meaning. **Peace**, in this sense, is the one strong word with which **the atmosphere of friendship created among equals** has been appropriately named. But to embrace this, one has to come to understand the origin of this peace in the **conspiratio**, a curious ritual behavior almost forgotten today.

This is how I chanced upon this insight. In 1986, a few dozen peace research centers in Africa and Asia were planning to open a common resource center. The founding assembly was held in Japan, and the leaders were looking for a Third World speaker. However, for reasons of delicacy, they wanted a person who was neither Asian nor African, and took me for a Latin American; then they pressured me to come. So I packed my *guayabera* shirt and departed for the Orient.

In Yokohama I addressed the group, speaking as a historian.

I wanted first to dismantle any universal notion of peace; I wanted to stress the claim of each ethnos to its own peace, the right of each community to be left in its peace. It seemed important to make clear that **peace is not an abstract condition, but a very specific spirit to be relished in its particular, incommunicable uniqueness by each community.**

However, my aim in Yokohama was twofold: I wanted to examine not only the meaning but also the history and perversion of peace in that appendix to Asia and Africa we call Europe. After all, **most of the world in the twentieth century is suffering from the enthusiastic acceptance of European ideas, including the European concept of peace.** The assembly in Japan gave me a chance to contrast the unique spirit of peace that was born in Christian Europe with **its perversion and counterfeit when, in international political parlance, an ideological link is created between economic development and peace.** I argued that **only by de-linking *pax* (peace) from development could the heretofore unsuspected glory hidden in *pax* be revealed.** But to achieve this before a Japanese audience was difficult.

The Japanese have an iconogram that stands for something we do not have or say or feel: *foodó*. My teacher, Professor Tamanoy, explained *foodó* to me as, "*the inimitable freshness that arises from the commingling of a particular soil with the appropriate waters.*" Trusting my learned pacifist guide, since deceased, I started from the notion of *foodó*. It was easy to explain that both Athenian *philia* and *Pax Romana*, as different as they are from each other, are incomparable to *foodó*. **Athenian *philia* bespeaks the friendship among the free men of a city, and Roman *pax* bespeaks the administrative status of a region dominated by the Legion** that had planted its insignia into that soil. Thanks to Professor Tamanoy's assistance, it was easy to elaborate on the contradictions and differences between these two notions, and get the audience to comment on similar heteronomies in the cultural meaning of peace within India or between neighboring groups in Tanzania. The kaleidoscopic incarnations of peace all referred to a particular, highly desirable atmosphere. So far the conversation was easy.

Conspiratio

However, speaking about *pax* in the proto-Christian epoch turned out to be a delicate matter, because around the year 300, *pax* became a key word in the Christian liturgy. It became **the euphemism for a mouth-to-mouth kiss among the faithful attending services**; *pax* became the camouflage for the ***osculum*** (from *os*, mouth), or the ***conspiratio*, a commingling of breaths.**

My friend felt I was not just courting misunderstanding, but perhaps giving offense, by mentioning such body-to-body contact in public. The gesture, up to this day, is repugnant to Japanese.

The **Latin *osculum*** is neither very old nor frequent. It is one of three words that can be translated by the English, “kiss”. In comparison with the affectionate *basium* and the lascivious *suavium*, *osculum* was a late comer into classical Latin, and was used in only one circumstance as a ritual gesture: in the second century, it became the sign given by a departing soldier to a woman, thereby recognizing her expected child as his offspring.

In the Christian liturgy of the first century, the *osculum* assumed a new function. It became one of two high points in the celebration of the Eucharist. ***Conspiratio***, the mouth-to-mouth kiss, became the solemn liturgical gesture by which participants in the cult-action shared their breath or spirit with one another. **It came to signify their union in one Holy Spirit, the community that takes shape in God’s breath.** The ecclesia came to be through a public ritual action, the *liturgy*, and **the soul of this liturgy was the *conspiratio*.** Explicitly, corporeally, the central Christian celebration was understood as **a co-breathing, a conspiracy, the bringing about of a common atmosphere, a divine milieu.**

The other eminent moment of the celebration was, of course, the *comestio*, the communion in the flesh, the incorporation of the believer in the body of the Incarnate Word, but *communio* was theologically linked to the preceding *conspiratio*. *Conspiratio* became the strongest, clearest and most unambiguously **somatic expression for the entirely non-hierarchical creation of a fraternal spirit in preparation for the unifying meal.** Through the act of eating, the fellow conspirators were **transformed into a “we”, a gathering which in Greek means *ecclesia*.** Further, they believed that the “we” is also somebody’s “I”; they were nourished by **shading into the “I” of the Incarnate Word.** The words and actions of the liturgy are not just mundane words and actions, but **events occurring after the Word, that is, after the Incarnation.** Peace as the commingling of soil and waters sounds cute to my ears; but **peace as the result of *conspiratio* exacts a demanding, today almost unimaginable intimacy.**

The practice of the *osculum* did not go unchallenged; documents reveal that the *conspiratio* created scandal early on. The rigorist African Church Father, Tertullian, felt that a decent matron should not be subjected to possible embarrassment by this rite. The practice continued, but not its name; the ceremony required a euphemism. From the later third century on, the *osculum pacis* was referred to simply as *pax*, and the gesture was often watered down to some slight touch to signify the mutual spiritual union of the persons present through the creation of a fraternal atmosphere. Today, the *pax* before communion, called “*the kiss of peace*”, is still integral to the Roman, Slavonic, Greek and Syrian Mass, although it is often reduced to a perfunctory handshake.

Community

I could no more avoid telling the story in Yokohama than today in Bremen. Why? Because the very idea of peace understood as a hospitality that reaches out to the stranger, and of a free assembly that arises in the practice of hospitality cannot be understood without reference to the Christian liturgy in which the community comes into being by the mouth-to-mouth kiss.

However, just as the antecedents of peace among us cannot be understood without reference to *conspiration* the historical uniqueness of a city's climate, atmosphere or spirit calls for this reference. The European idea of peace that is synonymous with the somatic incorporation of equals into a community has no analogue elsewhere.

Community [*] in our European tradition is not the outcome of an act of authoritative foundation, nor a gift from nature or its gods, nor the result of management, planning and design, but the consequence of a *conspiracy*, a deliberate, mutual, somatic and gratuitous gift to each other. The prototype of that *conspiracy* lies in the celebration of the early Christian liturgy in which, no matter their origin, men and women, Greeks and Jews, slaves and citizens, engender a physical reality that transcends them. The shared breath, the *conspiratio* are the "peace" understood as the community that arises from it.

[*] Let us not forget that the European tradition of "*community*" (cum + munis) combines the reciprocal gift system described by Marcel Mauss with the civic organization of common defense. The most cooperative it is within its heavily walled city, the more aggressive it is outside.

Historians have often pointed out that the idea of a **social contract**, which dominates political thinking in Europe since the 14th century, has its concrete origins in the way founders of medieval towns conceived urbane civilities. I fully agree with this. However, by focusing on the contractual aspect of this incorporation, attention is distracted from the good that such contracts were meant to protect, namely, peace resulting from a *conspiratio*. One can fail to perceive the pretentious absurdity of attempting a contractual insurance of an atmosphere as fleeting and alive, as tender and robust, as *pax*.

The word *pax* referring to *pax romana*, it designates an imposed peace, not a free and friendly one. *Philia*, here, would have been preferable.

The medieval merchants and craftsmen who settled at the foot of a lord's castle felt the need to make the conspiracy that united them into a secure and lasting association. To provide for their general surety, they had recourse to a device, the *coniuratio*, a mutual promise confirmed by an oath that uses God as a witness. Most societies know the oath, but the use of God's name to make it stick first appears as a legal device in the codification of roman law made by the Christian emperor Theodosius. « **Conjuration** » or the **swearing together by a common oath confirmed by the invocation of God**, just like the liturgical *osculum* is of Christian origin. *Conjuratio* which uses God as epoxy for the social bond presumably assures stability and durability to the atmosphere engendered by the *conspiratio* of the citizens. In this linkage between *conspiratio* and *coniuratio*, **two equally unique concepts inherited from the first millennium of Christian history are intertwined, but the latter, the contractual form soon overshadowed the spiritual substance.**

The medieval town of central Europe thus was indeed a profoundly new historical gestalt: **the *conjuratio conspirativa* which makes European urbanity distinct from urban modes elsewhere**. It implies a peculiar dynamic strain between the atmosphere of *conspiratio* and its legal, contractual constitution. Ideally, the spiritual climate is the source of the city's life that flower into a hierarchy, like a shell or frame, to protect its order. Insofar as the city is understood to originate in a *conspiratio*, it owes its social existence to the *pax*, the breath shared equally among all.

Hospitality

This long reflection on the historical precedence to the cultivation of atmosphere in late twentieth century Bremen seemed necessary to me to defend **its intrinsically conspiratorial nature**. It seems necessary to understand why, arguably, independent criticism of the established order of modern, technogene, information-centered society **can grow only out of a milieu of intense hospitality**.

As a scholar I have been shaped by a monastic tradition and by the interpretation of medieval texts. Early on, I took it for granted that the principal condition for an atmosphere that is propitious to **independent thought** is the **hospitality** cultivated by the host: a hospitality that **excludes condescension as scrupulously as seduction**; a hospitality that **by its simplicity defeats the fear of plagiarism as much as that of clientage** a hospitality that **by its openness dissolves intimidation as studiously as servility**; a hospitality that **exacts from the guests as much generosity as it imposes on the host**.

I have been blessed with a large portion of it, with the taste of a relaxed, humorous, sometimes grotesque fit among mostly ordinary but sometimes outlandish companions who are patient with one another. More so in Bremen than anywhere else.

Ivan Illich (Bremen, March 14, 1998)