Conviviality directs our focus on the everyday process of how people live together in mundane encounters, of how they (re)translate between their sustained differences and how they (re)negotiate minimal consensuses. This seems more pressing than ever because of continued diversification, the failure of the integration and multiculturalism paradigms and the restless competition and ongoing marginalisation due to unfavourable economic conditions in times of crisis.

Unlike the obvious tendencies that such difficult conditions might entail, conviviality points at phenomena different from ethnic absolutism, cultural racism and nationalism. It references the forms of sociality generally understood as the entire field of someone’s social relations, which are characterised by a minimal, yet sufficient, engagement with diversity and difference. Homogenising and cleansing tendencies which are rife in the political discourse on belonging and autochthony (Geschiere 2009) hinder the constructive engagement with differences. The perspective of conviviality is different from processes in which imagined communities continue to play a large role for integration and which suggest homogenisation. Similarly, the scenarios of cultural hybridity and mixing should be considered as distinct from conviviality since they are not concerned with the translation and negotiation of sustained differences; rather, they stress processes in which cultural differences have become unrecognisable. Different from Gilroy (2005: xv), who argues that ethnic differences in the form of ‘multiculture’ have become ordinary or unremarkable, I maintain that cultural differences remain meaningful in times of enhanced diversification (Vertovec 2007b), especially when they combine with situations of hierarchy and social inequality. These cultural differences challenge the idea of living peacefully with difference and contribute to the uncertainties of convivialities.

The conceptual notion of ‘conviviality’ needs to be set apart from its commonplace English meaning. In accordance with Overing and Passes (2000: xiii) conviviality conceptually ‘eschews . . . [and] transcends the particular English sense of simply having a good (and, it is implicit, slightly inebriated) time in the company of others’. I shall show that tension, conflict and frustration form part of a conceptual notion of conviviality as well as situations of consensus, consideration and respect. On analysing cooperative and conflictual situations in negotiation and translation processes, convivialities emerge as fragile and changing and only able to 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. It is the diversification of a local population and the perceived failure of integration and multiculturalism (Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010) that raise questions of conviviality in the first place. As one of the earliest relevant examples, the Castilian term convivencia makes reference to Andalusia and the Middle Ages when Jews, Muslims and Christians simultaneously resided there (see Mann et al. 1992; Suárez-Navaz 2004: 191 ff). Similarly, Catalonia uses the term convivència in migration-related policy documents to describe ways of dealing with difference, and in Senegal cohabitation is used to address the living together of the different faith communities (Erickson 2011; cf. Heil 2014). All of these emic notions – similar but not identical with the English term – address the process of conviviality that this contribution will outline. As political terms, however, they have a normative connotation which conviviality as a concept does not assert.

Since I am concerned with social encounters, including the most fleeting, which happen between people who perceive one another as different, urban spaces – which in principle are accessible to all – are the logical arena of conviviality. As Goffman (1966: 4) argues, parks, streets and squares, generally referred to as public spaces, ‘tell us a great deal about [the] most diffuse forms of social organization’. Unable to pay a great deal of attention to the spaces of conviviality, I proceed here in three steps. First, I take inspiration from the discussion of cosmopolitanism to state why conviviality seems better suited as an analytical term to study living with sustained differences. In the second section I enquire into the various modes of everyday interactions and their absence to understand what kind of sociality conviviality evokes and which other dynamics, such as avoidance and uncertainty, can be at play in encounters with difference. Finally, I explore the limits of the processes leading to convivialities as they consist of situations of agreement and others of conflict. I conclude that conviviality highlights processes that remain fragile due to the interplay of people who remain culturally and socially different with normative, pragmatic and tactical motives at stake.

Beyond cosmopolitanism

To start, I shall situate my interest in conviviality in relation to concepts that address living with difference. Often, social situations characterised by the participants’ engagement with diversity and difference have been dealt with under the heading of cosmopolitanism (e.g. Delanty 2012; Skrbiš and Woodward 2013).

Closest to my interest in conviviality are those notions of cosmopolitanism that have been refined as working class, vernacular, everyday or in another way mundane (e.g. Noble 2009; Werbner 1999). Such a refinement appears necessary, since these authors are interested in practices of ‘ordinary’ people including migrants and their activities. Due to its suggestive links to the life worlds and concerns of a small elite of upper middle class people aspiring to world citizenship, cosmopolitanism has been continuously critiqued for being a Western elite project and derived from a Kantian global humanism (see Delanty 2006). Qualified cosmopolitanism, however, describes everyone’s everyday practices, attitudes and competencies that cope just fine with difference. Providing some more detail, many authors maintain that a certain openness to difference is key – a classical cosmopolitan value (e.g. Skrbiš and Woodward 2013: 2) – while others argue that people act strategically to get something done (e.g. Noble 2009: 51), or mainly are pragmatic and unable to react to the multiple differences encountered in super-diverse situations.
Conviviality as derived from emic concepts of living with difference does not carry the same elitist and normative baggage of cosmopolitanism. Rather, it delineates a process which describes aspects of the everyday life in neighbourhoods where local residents engage in practices and discourses of living together, engaging with, confronting and embracing differences. It thereby additionally draws from a number of locally available discourses and concepts such as teranga (Wolof: hospitality), siinoooyaa (Mandinka: neighbourliness), 规矩 (gui ju, a Singaporian code of conduct), hierarchical incorporation, multilingualism, respect and, as one among many, a cosmopolitan self-representation. Conviviality, I hold, addresses an engagement with cultural diversity across social classes. Surely, there are differences of whether one belongs to a working class family or has received an elite education abroad which has bestowed one with cultural capital, including some kind of cosmopolitan self-understanding. However, speaking of conviviality as minimal sociality, it remains universally applicable as a form of human interaction in which differences are negotiated and translated.

Clearly, it would be too easy to stop here, since inequality, conflict, depreciation, social stratification and status differences persist everywhere alongside cultural differentiation. Despite increased cultural globalisation, many contemporary social situations continue to be characterised by cultural essentialism and closure (Wimmer 2013). Inevitably, cosmopolitanism carries the risk of representing the positively perceived counterpart of such developments. Conviviality conceptually embraces both since it ties in with the everyday and the ordinary. In this domain of people’s lives, both agreement and conflict concerning living with difference can be found.

Despite this argument for the general analytical value of conviviality, it has most strongly been attributed to specific ethnographic fields and cultural practices. For example, Overing and Passes (2000: 2) suggest in their introduction that conviviality is key to Amazonian sociality. Gilroy (2005) perceived conviviality among youths in postcolonial cities. I myself embraced a West African migrant perspective to study conviviality, asking whether there was something specific to their pre-migration socialisation with diversity in Casamance, Senegal, that explained their participation in conviviality in Catalonia. Indeed, they had been habituated into ways of living with sustained differences despite processes of homogenisation and closure.

Conviviality should not, however, be disregarded as a culture-specific way of socialisation. Apart from the specific convivialities practised in certain parts of the world and their corresponding emic notions, the level of minimal sociality that conviviality addresses is a crucial one which, I hold, has been frequently neglected. In my understanding, conviviality neither addresses community cohesion and solidarity, nor is it concerned with indifference and neglect. It addresses the in-between, the fleeting, the superficial and the unremarkable. This can be studied well by taking cases into account that show the historical rootedness of living with difference. It will become clear that these processes are not mainly concerned with normative ideals but rather with working consensuses in the everyday. Next, I further develop the everyday focus of conviviality as part of the realm of minimal, yet sufficient, sociality.

**Focusing on the everyday**

The aspects of ordinary social relations in the everyday are diverse and include openness, civility, avoidance, vigilance, dispute, indifference, curiosity, etc. In encounters, many nuances of living with difference are perceptible, showing, apart from respect, consideration and a certain easiness with difference, silent forms of domination and marginalisation, tactical alliances and careful responses to negative potentialities emanating from neighbours and strangers alike. All of these dimensions of sociality manifest in convivialities as forces perpetually constitute, change and challenge social relations. Analytically, they play out in interactions and ensuing
(re-)negotiations and (re)translations of social and cultural differences, which are ongoing in everyday conviviality.

In particular, conviviality shares an interest in ordinary, pragmatic and potentially partial and fleeting aspects of sociality with the scholarship on (in)civility, which refers to interactions with strangers in public spaces (Boyd 2006; Sennett 2005). Emphasising the challenge of ‘finding ways to knit the city together without homogenising it’ (Sennett 2005: 2), civility, as ‘the capacity of people who differ to live together’ (ibid.: 1), directly addresses a central concern of conviviality. Concerning the quality of interactions, Vertovec (2007a: 32) sees civility in ‘cordial but distant relations’, and Boyd (2006: 867) defines being civil to strangers as ‘treating them with an “easy spontaneity” that demonstrates both a willingness to look past differences and that communicates equal respect.’ Implying that everyone is a respected equal, civil relations thus neither refer to just living side by side described by pragmatism and indifference, nor do they imply ties relying on strong obligations, expectations and solidarity common to group specific sociability. Contrary to the perceived risk of civil relations being overlooked as meaningless, conviviality substantiates their relevance in diverse settings. This scholarship has raised several issues of importance to understanding convivialities, for example questions of equality, indifference, respect, social distance and spontaneity. Some of these dimensions go beyond that which the focus on civility can provide and which is relevant for delineating the sphere of conviviality. Put differently, it would be too simple only to qualify people’s behaviours towards others, who are different (or not), as either civil or not.

Sustained differences, which at times might result in civil encounters, can also foster mutual avoidance. Early on, studies concerned with plural societies observed that ‘groups of differing race and culture liv[e] side by side in economic symbiosis and mutual avoidance’ (Smith 1974: vii). Smith thus opposed consensual theory and blamed it for ‘begin[ning] by assuming the normative consensual integration of all social systems’ (ibid.: xiii). The juxtaposition of avoidance and consensus raises the question of whether conviviality is founded on common values and willing submission to them, unwilling submission and coercion, or avoidance. This is of utmost importance, since Goffman (2008 [1967]) leaves no doubt that in face-to-face interactions mutual avoidance is a key strategy of people fearing to lose face by acting inappropriately, a heightened risk if cultural differences complicate the communication process.

In contrast to utter avoidance or indifference, which can both run the risk of leading only to indispensable exchange or mere co-presence, engaged encounter or face-to-face interaction is a crucial practice of conviviality (Gilroy 2005: xv). In a similar vein, social contact and encounter are necessary ingredients of local liveability. In convivial interactions, I suggest that cultural differences and degrees of social inequality are continuously maintained in stressing the relevance of negotiation and translation. Thus, Noble (2009: 51) notes that ‘unpanic’ in situations of diversity ‘emerge[s] out of sustained practices of accommodation and negotiation’. However, rather than mainly heralding relatively stable relations, as Noble does, negotiation is ongoing and the limits of negotiation need to be explored. This inevitably re-introduces the fragility of conviviality and its being in-process. The same holds true for translation between distinct, but concurring, systems of meaning. Translation can be understood ‘as a continuous process of re-articulation and re-contextualization, without any notion of a primary origin’ (Hall and Chen 2005: 394). The practice of translation is also part of ‘cosmopolitan conviviality’ for Gilroy (2005: 8), which he juxtaposes to ethnocentrism as untranslatability. To translate references the acts of comparing, connecting and understanding processes and practices that at first seem irreconcilably different.

The importance of these three basic practices of conviviality has been frequently noted by scholars who studied living with difference.
Intentions and acts of greeting and mutually acknowledging the presence of the other may serve as obvious examples of the processes of conviviality. In my own fieldwork, Senegalese immigrants to Spain regularly emphasised the need to show respect to and recognition of those encountered by spending time greeting them and enquiring into the whereabouts of their close ones. Furthermore, they regularly found themselves in social situations where greeting was reduced to almost nothing, something like a nodding of heads or an ‘hola’. In situations, however, in which no interaction took place at all, Senegalese immigrants felt that conviviality was non-existent, which would lead to uncertain social situations with unknown social consequences. Greetings reduced this uncertainty by gaining some initial insights into who the other one is. The differences encountered in conceptions of greeting at times required translation justifying that an ‘hola’ could indeed be an acceptable replacement for long chats. Exposing of various forms of ‘truncated multilingualism’ (Blommaert et al. 2005: 199), the knowing of just enough of the other’s language to get by, also falls into the realm of translation. The disjuncture over how to engage one another causes uncertainty and conflict, which requires negotiation. As a consequence, in conviviality both normative and tactical considerations combine in many ways. Greeting is presented as a moral obligation which enhances the need for negotiation. Addressing someone unknown in his own mother tongue and finding out about them are tactical choices. Whether consciously lived or habitually accommodated, differences continue to matter in such circumstances and are a central element of conviviality.

Leading on from these insights into micro-interactions, the spectrum between avoiding and seeking interaction needs to be closely evaluated since social settings always bear the potential of negative social consequences. Choosing extreme examples, Vigh (2011) traces the origins of people’s hyper-vigilance to the negative potentiality of ubiquitous long-term conflict and uncertainty in Guinea Bissau and Belfast. Lacking predictability, Vigh (ibid.: 99) defines social hyper-vigilance as ‘characterized by a constant awareness and preparedness toward the negative potentialities of social figures and forces.’ I suggest that everyday life among people who differ to various degrees is equally in flux and full of uncertain outcomes, even if violence does not penetrate everyday life to the same extent. Thus, people observe and enquire into the processes and people around them, trying to ‘tell’ from where risks will emanate. As an alternative to keeping a distance, interaction and greetings are a preferred way of local residents to find out about new arrivals while at the same time establishing rapport (Goffman 2008 [1967]: 41, note 30). This analysis falls into the domain of conviviality since it encompasses phenomena that are in between set categories and which lack clear-cut signs that could provide orientation.

In complex social situations, in which multiple differences overlap and the intentions of those encountered can stem from various sources, being prudent and sometimes trying to avoid encounters is part of the everyday. Such behaviours may cast a doubt on people’s commitment to interaction, but at the same time they offer a nuanced reading of minimal forms of sociality as they spring from the processes of conviviality. Furthermore, they raise the questions of whether and to what extent avoidance and even indifference can play a role in conviviality, especially if we think of the increasing number of people in precarious conditions in current societies. This also importantly affects the relationship of agreement and conflict in the processes of conviviality. It is to this last aspect that I devote the remainder of this discussion.

**Between agreement and conflict**

Authors who use conviviality in its literal sense – referring to generally friendly but superficial relations – would most likely not disagree with the idea that conviviality delineates minimal sociality (e.g. Gandhi and Hoek 2012). As we have seen, however, they limit their analysis to
agreeable aspects of living together. However, the minimal and fleeting kind of sociality, not least in relation to difference, seems full of uncertainty, discontinuities and ruptures that emerge from translating between differences and negotiating minimal consensuses in conviviality. Such processes are often conflictual when they are lived in interaction. Rather than juxtaposing conviviality and conflict, I suggest that conviviality encompasses both cooperative and conflictual social situations.

The example of greeting on p. 321 has revealed how conviviality relies on everyday practice. Reciprocal greeting which manifests mutual respect can be described as happening in mutual agreement. In contrast, passing without greeting can be interpreted as avoidance, disregard or indifference, which in the view of some may border on exclusion and open discrimination, or at least evoke such feelings. Clearly such encounters are bound to provoke conflictual situations. Mutual accusations of not cohering to social consensuses, which some perceive to be locally valid, reveal a disquieting facet of conviviality. Local residents who stick to various views concerning greeting practices may accuse each other of falling short of their expectations. Yet in more or less open negotiations they will either re-constitute a former consensus or eventually formulate a different one. Conviviality understood as social process inevitably encompassed such conflictual episodes as well. Trying to understand enough about differences – a practice observable among migrant populations – further deescalates the negotiation process by way of conceptual translation.

Normative, tactical and pragmatic considerations play out in translation and negotiation practices of local residents who try to address their differences in conviviality. Tactical and pragmatic solutions gain centrality in circumstances when cultural differences are linked to questions of relative (in)equality, hierarchy and status differences. Well-known examples of this in contexts of migration and cultural diversity are the differentiations between first-comers and late-comers, hosts or landlords and strangers, autochthons and allochthons (e.g. Geschiere 2009). In such configurations, cultural differences mark important social distinctions and valuations. The processes of a guest’s reception under the heading of hospitality and a stranger’s social incorporation are clearly marked by the power differentials between patrons (hosts, landlords) and clients (strangers, guests, immigrants). Tensions and contradictions arise from an array of possible practices, which range from granting strangers respect and thus social recognition to their potential marginalisation and exclusion. As a consequence, I suggest that, apart from negotiating cultural differences, conviviality faces the challenge of contesting and accommodating power hierarchies and status differences. In such cases, conviviality risks being hampered by people’s mutual avoidance and vigilance.

On the other hand, hierarchical but reciprocal relations are omnipresent and commonplace. In everyday encounters, negotiations and translation do not need to result in equality. All that is up for negotiation are ways to live with difference. Quite often, this also implies living with some level of hierarchy and stratification that is perceived to be acceptable; only a sufficient equality can be achieved. The latter actually can form part of the negotiated shared understandings, especially if the consensus found is a reciprocal one.

The tactical engagements with local configurations of difference and power on the one hand can aim at achieving a minimal consensus to regain peaceful interaction. On the other hand, their intention can also be both to increase the individual autonomy of expression and to subvert dominant discourses. Interaction therefore necessarily encompasses both cooperative and conflictual elements, keeping outcomes uncertain. Following de Certeau (1988), the tactics of those in relatively less powerful positions are their creative ways to engage with and contest dominant institutionalised structures. Conviviality can raise our awareness of such negotiations in times of pervasive status and power differences due to increased diversification, which includes...
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a plurality of legal statuses and migration control. However, outcomes also remain uncertain since the processes of conviviality may fail and result in uncertainty and open confrontation.

The extent to which conflictual interactions are part of convivialities can be discerned in the light of ongoing negotiations and translations. Perceiving differences in interaction is potentially conflictual, yet it may be embraced in negotiation and, conceivably, translation. For example, upon arrival in a new place, migrants learn different everyday practices in their encounters with other local residents. Differences in greeting are a case in point. If everyday practices and the understanding of how things are habitually done vary, the various participants in the encounter will potentially try to translate between the differences. Alternatively, a social negotiation process is bound to start to which the conflicting views will be subjected. The latter does not have to imply hostility and escalation; a situation may result in which everyone follows different but relatively compatible ways of interacting. An understanding of how and why practices differ reveals the local populations’ translation efforts; however, the level of tension or conflict in such processes of conviviality remains unpredictable. Where the limits of the capacity of convivialities to embrace social inequalities lie remains an empirical question. Yet, I suggest that physical violence in encounters as well as fundamentalist beliefs are incompatible with convivialities. Both foreclose the forming of consensus in the processes of interacting and negotiating, and of making differences mutually intelligible by way of (cultural) translation.

Conclusion: fragile convivialities

We have seen that living with cultural and social differences comes to the fore in various ways and at the intersection of a set of social practices. It raises the crucial question of how people’s everyday practices mediate cultural differences as well as power relations and (in)equality structures in diverse societies. Defining conviviality as the field of such processes and setting it in relation to complementary concepts, I suggested looking into practices like interaction, negotiation and translation since they are relevant in both cooperative and conflictual situations. Despite challenges to the feasibility of interaction due to mutual avoidance and exclusion, I have upheld that these basic practices are part of the process from which minimal local consensuses can emerge. Their raison d’être is the sharing of urban spaces peacefully in diversity and with difference. It is a mode of sociality that builds on difference, rather than trying to erase or subjugate it. By relying on various processes and forms of interaction, consensuses are changing and convivialities remain malleable and alive.

People enter the processes which constitute conviviality with various, sometimes conflicting, intentions. Normative convictions combine with, and are juxtaposed to, those that are tactical and creative, as well as purely pragmatic considerations concerning the ways of engaging with social situations characterised by diversity. The interplay of situational and uncertain, as well as habitual and predictable, responses to changing configurations of diversity is equally characteristic of convivialities. Whether people move or stay put, static conceptions of living with difference increasingly seem inapplicable to contemporary conditions of diversification. Whether urban spaces are designed as spaces of encounter or not, people are bound to partake in the processes of conviviality while also living up to their distinctiveness. Maybe more than ever, we need to study those everyday aspects of sociality that are about living together with sustained differences.

Notes

1 This plays down the fact that the three faith communities never lived together on equal terms (Kamen 1998).
Nevertheless, people from everywhere practise cosmopolitanism (e.g. Breckenridge et al. 2002).

For the exemplary concepts from Senegal (Wolof, Mandinka), see Heil (2014); for规矩 (gui ju), see Ye (this volume).

References


