Inhabiting the ecological conversion
Experiments in diavolution

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Abstract. The paper reflects on the issue of ecological transition from a political perspective. An attempt is made here to reassess Alex Langer's approach to ecology through the lens of 'conversion', examining the implications of his legacy for a new vision of citizenship. A suggestion is made to consider what could be the alternative to a 'symbolic' take on the ecological transition, retrieving a few indications from Peirce's pragmaticist philosophy.

Keywords: ecological transition, political agency, pragmaticism, social experimetnation, diavolution.

Political agency and the act of conversion

Since the mid-1980s, the environmental activist and co-founder of The Green Group in the European Parliament (then European Green Party), Alex Langer (1986; 1994), employed the expression 'ecological conversion' to indicate something more radical than a simple technological-engineering approach to the challenges raised by political ecology.[1] The word 'conversion' is, indeed, of religious origin, and evokes that existential *metánoia* whereby the subject's relation to the world is shaken to its foundations so as to engender a sudden, total change of the self *and* the world simultaneously.[2] Langer stressed that a technocratic approach to ecological problems was largely insufficient, insofar as it obliterated the issue of subjective *desire*: as he put it straightforwardly, 'we will only attain ecological conversion when it becomes desirable.'

Such desirability of conversion can emerge, in Langer's view, from a deep re-evaluation of the meaning of *boundaries* and *limits*: on the one hand, Langer's personal political commitment had led him to challenge a number of social boundaries that commonly separate closed groups, starting from the one between Italians and Germans in his native region, South

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[2] Significantly, in 2015 the expression 'ecological conversion' has been officially introduced into the Magisterium of the Church with the second encyclical by Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*. (Francis 2015: §6, III).

Tyrol. Langer considered himself to be an 'ethnic objector', an 'ethnic traitor' and an 'ethnic deserter' who had rejected the official ethnic census that was – and still is – in place in the northernmost province of Italy.[3] Similarly, since the 1960s, Langer had in his political practice overcome the boundary between Catholicism and leftist revolutionary activism; subsequently, in the course of the 1980s and 1990s, as a Member of the European Parliament, he actively pursued an ever closer cooperation between Western and Eastern Europe, fervently supporting the European enlargement, while never ceasing to critically challenge the mainstream understanding of Europe.[4]

On the other hand, since the 1980s, Langer was amongst those who most forcefully attracted the public attention towards the existence of clearly *impassable boundaries*, namely, the ecological *limits* of planet Earth. With respect to the ecological boundaries of the biosphere, Langer stressed, all humans are placed on the same side, that is, all are placed *on the inside* of such boundaries. Accordingly, the terrestrial boundaries of the biosphere come to define a condition of necessary 'interiority' of the humankind, where new measures must be set.[5] In this context, the *ecological conversion* advocated by Langer designates something that is at the same time both personal and social in extension, both attitudinal and practical in application, and remarkably trans-scalar in ambition, insofar as capable of working at different scales ranging from the very local to the very global.

The in-between time of ecological transition

While the act of *conversion* is a powerful one for the individual, and is associated to a radical existential *Umwertung*, a re-evaluation of values that often spurs subsequent remarkable achievements, it is also plausible that modern society, in its technical and administrative complexity, might not be able to switch instantly into the ecological mode evoked by Langer and others. It may be the case, in other words, that a period of 'inhabitation' of the conversion itself must be envisaged. The phrase 'inhabit the conversion' might read as a paradox – in

[3] He personally bore the brunt of such a stance twice: first, in the 1980s, his application to move his post of high-school professor from Rome back to Bozen/Bolzano was frozen; subsequently, in the 1990s, his political bid to run for mayor of Bozen was struck down by a court decision – all of this because he lacked the 'declaration of linguistic belonging,' upon which the ethnic census is premised.

[4] As concerns the latter, see in particular Langer (1995).

[5] Elsewhere, I have elaborated on the notion of interiority with reference to Elias Canetti's work, which raises very similar quesitons (Brighenti forthcoming).

fact, I suggest, it is the most urgent skill to learn and train today. The terminology of 'transition' has been proposed to the same effect, and various European countries have indeed institutionalised such approach by creating 'ecological transition' ministries and programmes.[6] However, the current mainstream conception of transition is not only a watered-down version of conversion – it is also a *sterilized* conception where a remarkably technocratic-capitalist machinery (made of carbon bonds, eco-incentives etc.) has come to replace the humanistic understanding so passionately endorsed by Langer.

More amply, I think, the difference between transition and conversion can be excavated in terms of the question of inhabiting a shared city, which equates with the question of identifying political *subjectivity* by bridging it to political *agency*. The gap between the radicalness of Langer's *conversion* and the sloppy, often ambivalent approach that we can see at play in current approaches to *transition*[7] is not by chance reminiscent of the classic 20th-century gap between revolutionary and reformist political action. In this short reflection, I submit that, today, any real transformative process must address the blind spot of both revolution and reform. To do so, we must, in the first place, not loose sight of the fact that both revolution and reform fundamentally converge on the organisational plane. Whether through the continuous reformist path, or through the discontinuous revolutionary outbreak, a similar organizational dream can be seen at work throughout the spectrum of modernist political action (Brighenti 2008). That is why the issue of the *temporality* of the models for political ecology becomes pivotal, and the question I wish to address here concerns the possibility of letting emerge an ecologically-minded social temporality capable of playing with both continuity and discontinuity without falling prey to either techno-solutionist or politico-chimerical stances. Such is, arguably, the more profound meaning of the expression 'inhabiting the conversion.'

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[6] As of 2022, France, Spain and Italy have environment management ministries where the word 'transition' appears explicitly.

[7] A typical example is the widespread use of extremely toxic glyphosate-based herbicides in industrial agriculture. The dangers to human health posed by glyphosates are widely documented by medical studies. In 2017, Italy voted against glyphosates in the European Commission, but when the ban did not gather enough support, failed to implement a national law to prohibit them; in 2019, France passed a law to forbid these products, but waived the ban since the beginning of the pandemic in 2020 as a means to 'support' farmers; more generally, the large majority of European countries does not even have a phase-out calendar for glyphosates.

Alex Langer's work can be placed in the lineage of Ivan Illich's earlier analyses of the industrial society. Illich's problem resided in finding ways to conceive of an industrial society that does not end up being incapacitating or crippling towards its members. In this respect, both Langer and Illich can be considered as figures who embodied the pragmatist attitude. If, by pragmatism, we mean a philosophy that renounces principled decisions, and instead invites us to judge actions from their actual consequences, we must notice that such attitude cannot but be placed under the auspices of a philosophy of immanence – and this despite the fact that both Illich and Langer were religious believers. Yet only pragmatism, I think, can explain the emphasis these authors placed on 'tools': whereas Langer (1994b) invited us to 'equip ourselves for cohabitation', Illich (1973) had called called for the elaboration of a wide set of 'tools for conviviality'. Illich, in particular, was keen on emphasising the paradox of the self-propelling nature of the institutional offer of goods in contemporary affluent societies: 'Our present institutions abridge basic human freedom for the sake of providing people with more institutional outputs' (*ibid*., 25). That is why, he contended, 'people need new tools to work with rather than tools that 'work' for them' (*ibid*., 23). The perverse effect of tools integrated into systems is that they increase overall reliance and dependency, instead of fostering autonomy. Rather than surrounding ourselves with machines that do the work for us, Illich reasoned, we should rather focus on becoming the active utilizers of an enlarged set of instruments.

Learning to train desires

The criticism of the passivity of the consumer before the industrial-bureaucratic machinery was a defining feature of critical theories in the 1960s and 1970s. Just as in Illich, it can be found extensively among the Situationists, too. In my view, it is clear that, however important such a critique was at the time, today it no longer suffices in the task of envisaging a politics of emancipation. Indeed, there is now ample evidence that, with the 'activation' of consumers in digital capitalism, things have not necessarily improved: the coming of a 'postindustrial' society in the sense articulated by Illich, has not entailed the advent of ecological conversion – to the contrary, the hyperactivity of the new media and the performative turn on the workplace have led to enhanced ecological degradation. 'Activation', rather than 'passivity', is the key to understand the spoiling of natural and social goods as it unfolds today, with the appalling gravity it has touched in terms of climate change, pollution, loss of biodiversity.

Economic theory must simply be turned upside down to make sense and match current reality: it is not that the more people need fuel, the more it costs, but quite on the contrary, the more the cost of fuel rises, the more people drive. In other words, it is generalized activation that defines the systemic requirement of our age.

The pragmatist heritage remains of the essence, but a new politics of emancipation no longer resides in *activating* and *liberating* desires, rather, I suggest, it resides in *training* and *improving* them, so as to meet the requirements for ecological conversion – requirements that are in themselves not simply technical and pre-determined, but fundamentally ideational and non-deterministic. In this task, the kernel of the pragmatist stance can be retrieved in its sternly *anti-symbolic* stance. With reference to the three-fold classification of signs elaborated by Charles Sanders Peirce, we should say that, in order to envisage ways to inhabit the ecological conversion, symbols *must give precedence* to *icons* and *indexes*. The reason is that iconicity and indexicality do not form codified systems ('habitual connection', in Peirce's parlance), but work operatively and tentatively – from the ground up, so to speak. Certainly, speaking of 'precedence' of the iconic and the indexical over the symbolic, does not mean that the symbolic should be simply discarded – for, as Peirce himself pointed out, all three forms are 'indispensable in all reasoning'.

The specific temporality called for by the task of 'inhabitation' is one that stands in opposition to the 'habitual', essentially *inertial* temporality that contradistinguishes the regime of the symbolic: in the domain of the symbolic, things become reasonable and predictable, tools come to be integrated and subsumed into systems.[8] That is why the temporal register of the symbolic is not part of the solution, but part of the problem. Icons and indexes offer a more promising terrain: icons correspond to the domain of likenesses and semblances – that ill-defined, informal field where similarities and affinities may appear without prearranged schemas; whereas indexes correspond to the active capacity to affect, act upon, and direct someone's attention. In short, with Peirce:

> There are three kinds of signs which are all indispensable in all reasoning; the first is the diagrammatic sign or icon, which exhibits a similarity or analogy to the subject of discourse; the second is the index, which like a pronoun demonstrative or relative, forces the attention to the particular object intended without describing it; the third [or symbol] is the general name or description which signifies its object by means of an association of ideas or habitual connection between the name and the character signified. (Peirce, *CP* §1.369).

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[8] Pierre Bourdieu had, in his sociology of *habitus*, pointed out something similar, although from a different perspective: according to Bourdieu, what habitus makes possible, and 'naturalised', is social domination.

We notice that, whereas the symbol largely operates in the domain of established significations and 'settled issues', both the icon and the index are experimental by nature. This is what makes them valuable to the present – for this interim period of inhabitation of the ecological conversion is an unsettled period almost by definition. Here, my idea is that we could put this time into the perspective of an open-ended enquiry to advance new modes of ecological existence. Inhabiting the ecological conversion would thus mean that we accept the 'experimental' stage we find ourselves at, and indeed turn into relentless experimenters ourselves. After all, nature is itself experimental, and science now tells us that we can no longer assume the general equilibrium postulate which underpinned classical ecological models of structuralist bent, but must face the reality of ecosystems evolving along trajectories – or, at the very least, in the process of transitioning across different equilibrium points.[9] Importantly, in my view, that does not mean that we should give up all criteria for *choosing* among possible different trajectories or courses of action and development – although it certainly does mean that, as we seek to repair the vessel, we are also on it, out on the sea. In other words, although we cannot appeal to the 'preservation of ecological equilibrium' as sound reason to opt for one course of action over another one, we must not give up the capacity to practically keep climate change and climate disaster apart from one another.

Experimenting with transduction

Inhabiting the ecological conversion could thus practically mean that the direction and pace which we can hope to impart to societal dynamics must be figured out with the help of 'experiments.' These are not only scientific experiments in the classic sense, but coordinated collective arrangements where a series of forms of inquiry, discovery and practice can be undertaken. Illich understood societal 'tools' as 'designed devices'; in line with this, the 'experiments' we need to conduct are, in the broadest sense, experiments *in design* – and, while we must remain alert to the fact that scale is a crucial political question of the present, given that scaling is never a neutral practice, we can also start small, were it not for the sense of empowerment that the very fact of concretely beginning an experiment conveys. Experiments are compressed, unique and outstanding moments: their temporality appears quite special, but also limited and bounded to a setting. That is why we must develop the ability to then translate such exceptional register into everyday existence – if we just were

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[9] The latter thesis is, specifically, what the theory of tipping points suggests (Milkoreit *et al.* 2018).

able to conduct one such experiment each day! Experiments tailored to inhabit the ecological conversion can be run in a relatively easy way by just staking out some dedicated time and space for them, bringing together people of different age, different classes, gender, orientations, preferences and so on, people with different skills, talents, passions and aspirations, so as to conduct intensive workshops and creative sessions where questions of inhabitation and ecological conversion can be unpacked with care and in detail. They can involve anything as specific as imagining new recycling schemes, designing reusable portable containers, or as general as delineating new strategies for political mobilisation at the global level. Even experiments with *bad things* can be important: for instance, we can fruitfully frequent failed urban projects, learning form the ruins and the spoiled places that have been left behind by the machines of capitalist growth and of authoritarian regulation.

The possibilities offered by *conversion* as a mode of societal-ecological transformation can be clarified with reference to the notion of 'transduction' elaborated by the French philosopher Gilbert Simondon (2013 [1964-1989]). It is necessary to read carefully the following extended passage by Simondon:

> By transduction we mean a physical, biological, mental, or social operation through which an activity propagates incrementally within a domain by basing this propagation on a structuration of the domain operated from one region to another: each structural region serves as a principle and model, as an initiator for constituting the following region, such that a modification thereby extends progressively throughout this structuring operation. The simplest image of the transductive operation is provided by the crystal, which, starting from a tiny germ, increases and extends following all the directions in its supersaturated mother liquor: each previously constituted molecular layer serves as the structuring basis for the layer in the process of forming; the result is an amplifying reticular structure. The transductive operation is an individuation in progress; within the physical domain, it can be effectuated in the simplest way via progressive iteration; but within more complex domains, like the domains of vital metastability or of the psychical problematic, it can advance with a constantly variable pace and extend into a domain of heterogeneity; there is transduction when there is an activity that starts from a being's structural and functional center and extends in various directions based on its center, as if multiple dimensions of the being appeared around this center; transduction is the correlative appearance of dimensions and structures within a being in a state of pre-individual tension, i.e. in a being which is more than unity and more than identity and which has not yet phase-shifted with respect to itself in multiple dimensions. The extreme terms attained by the transductive operation do not exist before this operation; its dynamism stems from the initial tension of the system of the heterogeneous being that phase-shifts and develops dimensions according to which it will be structured; it does not come from a tension between terms that will be attained and deposited at the extreme limits of transduction. Transduction can be a vital operation; in particular, it expresses the orientation of organic individuation; it can be a psychical operation and an effective logical procedure, although it is not at all limited to logical thought. In the domain of knowledge, it defines the veritable measure of invention, which is neither inductive nor deductive, but transductive, i.e. corresponds to a discovery of the dimensions according to which a problematic can be defined; it is an analogical operation, at least based on what is valid about this kind of operation. (2013 [1964-1989]: 13-14)

Experiments in ecological transduction may be helpful for learning the art of breaking deadlocks and exiting from vicious circles. Most current societal and ecological problems are, effectively, problems of vicious circles, circles of dependencies (from loans, from chemicals etc.) that hamper the ecological conversion of society. In many cases, we are stuck into ecologically vicious cycles; and yet interestingly, as seen above, our social-ecological systems are also, at the same time, already in a condition of *metastability* – in other words, they are beyond equilibrium, and ripe for change. We are, accordingly, well placed for furthering new 'individuations' to come ('the transductive operation is an individuation in progress'). The fact that transduction begin from a 'centre' must be understood correctly, again in the perspective of a philosophy of immanence: the centre is not pre-determined, to the contrary, the centre is *everywhere the transductive process takes hold* and begins a new structuration.

The ecological conversion cannot simply gesture towards sheer 'reconciliation' with nature, for such aim is still entirely premised upon the postulate of ecological equilibrium. Hence, the importance of what Simondon calls 'analogical operation': true analogy does not reduce difference, but amplifies it. It is not by chance, I think, that *analogy* is the same quality Peirce attributed to icons: neither individual nor general, iconicity proceeds through *singularities*, establishing flows of singularities across various objects in unforeseen ways. Again, the crucial idea is that likeness does not decrease difference, but to the contrary, it increases it. This suggests that transductive operations can be truly *inventive* to the extent that they are always effectuated through the *passage into a new dimension*. It is through such enrichment in dimensions that experiments with inhabiting the ecological conversion proceed most valuably. Transductive experiments must focus precisely on the emergence of those 'further dimensions' that enable us to reinterpret the problems posed in previously more reductionist way.

On measure and joy

In addition to analogical iconicity and its creative insight, the force of indexicality is to be factored into the equation, too. As considered above, indexes express the energetic aspect of semiotic relations: they are what makes a sign capable of directing someone's attention – if one wants, of making an actual change in the world. It is the indexical aspect that makes a sign truly living, acting, and compelling. For my part, some time ago I introduced the neologism 'diavolution' to indicate something akin to transduction in the domain of urban

political relations. It may be expedient to report the passage where the ratio for the neologism is presented:

> What is diavolution? The cross-breed term replaces the Latin prefix *re-* with the Greek prefix *dià-*, which means 'through'. The Latin root *volvo, -ĕre*, which means 'to turn', remains. Accordingly, I propose to introduce the neologism 'diavolution' to address, for essentially descriptive purposes, the incessant activity of *going through* the problems that characterize the relationship between the nomic and the anomic. Diavolution is thus a movement that intersects the trajectories of these problems in multiple directions, or slantwise. From this perspective, diavolution can be described as a non-anomic way to avoid the nomic. Diavolution does not stand in opposition to revolution: it addresses a moment of desire which is present in many revolutions. Diavolution is not reformism, it is not withdrawal. It does not express an option for sub-optimal results or compromise, it does not aim at any paradigmatic settlement. Diavolution addresses those conceptual movements and practices whose outcomes are anything but certain because they are neither directed from a centre – as *emanations* – nor bound to an *éschaton-katéchon* dynamic. Diavolution is the immanent and a-centric presence of *volution*. It can only come about when a shift from the third to the second person takes place: *de te fabula narratur*. (Brighenti 2008: 797)

The shift to the 'second person' evoked in this passage resonates with the indexical force outlined by Peirce. Diavolution is, in other words, a mode of practical engagement, and can only make sense in terms of what Michael Polanyi (1974[1958]) famously called 'personal knowledge'. There is no a-priori way to tell which is the 'right', 'correct' and 'true' knowledge to develop, and this again calls for an experimental attitude grounded in pragmatism. It is not necessary that the pragmatist be an optimist (although, certainly, Langer *was* one); suffice that s/he remains a priori non-judgemental, or, put differently, *sceptic*. The question of how to make ourselves 'at home' in the ecological conversion thus entails our remaining alert to the fact all 'homely' feeling is necessarily punctuated by the *unhomely* dimension of our condition. The disjointed state of the present lies in our being out-of-scale vis-à-vis the ecological requirements of existence. That is why our inhabitation of the ecological conversion is also inevitably going to be *uncomfortable*: the 'stain' cannot be removed. At the core of all ecological transductive experiments rests the issue of *measure* – again, with Illich, not only which type of tools we want to develop, but how many of them we should have:

> A convivial society should be designed to allow all its members the most autonomous action by means of tools least controlled by others. People feel joy, as opposed to mere pleasure, to the extent that their activities are creative; while the growth of tools beyond a certain point increases regimentation, dependence, exploitation, and impotence (Illich 1973: 33-34).

Tools have probably already grown beyond *that point*. In conclusion, it is not at all sure that we live in the era of 'Anthropocene': we will only be authorised to use the expression *only once* we have proven capable to avert the disaster we have been preparing for the living species, amongst which ourselves.

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