

# Towards a Digressive Society

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This paper is a copy of Digressive Society's conclusions. In the book *Digressive Society* (Bruchansky, 2015), I describe a society that would be based on the principle that no one is allowed to impose a principle on others. This paradoxical principle is, as I demonstrate, equivalent to the global maximisation of individual choices as well as the combating of all forms of alienation.

A digression should be understood in the positive sense, it is distancing ourselves from an initial intention, deviate from a pre-established or expected discourse. This book is, I hope, a productive attempt to develop a system at the crossroads of critical theory, existentialism, libertarianism, and anarchism: a system founded not on any preconceived notion of justice or human rights, but rooted in the ambiguous nature of human existence.

Projecting ourselves into the future, however well defined, is not enough to push us into deciding to take action. We need to be able to conceive of the path that separates us from that future. The digressive approach is, in some regards, within our immediate grasp. Not only is everything in our existence an excuse for digression, from the passing of time to our everyday conversations, but the principle underpinning this approach also offers a conceptual framework ideally suited to the participative movements that are already well underway, movements seeking to create alternative structures to the state and economic models that currently govern us. While it is true that certain aspects of the blueprint for a digressive society swim against the current, such as when it opposes the conception of universal rights, I would not have persevered in formulating such a society if I was not convinced of its coherence: I feel that the digressive approach is the only credible means for combating all forms of alienation.

A revolution would be highly unlikely to result in a digressive society: as one power is overturned, another one inevitably takes its place. The digressive approach does not entail replacing one principle with another, but allowing them to coexist. It would therefore only benefit indirectly from a shift in power. The goal is not to bring about the death of capitalism, justice or state, but to motivate and conciliate them. And I contend that we can pursue this aim right away, each and every one of us, both within the existing structures of power and within the structures capable of competing with them.

The digressive approach requires a large measure of subjectivity. In fact, we could refer to vocabulary rather than an approach to make it clear that it needs to be appropriated by anyone wishing to apply it. This subjectivity should not disconcert us; the fact that we may well feel overwhelmed by this approach merely reveals our dependence on the no less subjective positions required by the notions of justice,

common good, equality, freedom and rights.

Allow me to recall the main tenets of the approach.

1. A digressive society applies the paradoxical principle that no one is allowed to impose a principle on others.
2. Within this society, everyone could and should motivate their thoughts and actions without any principle or any authority being able to justify them and thus take away their responsibility for doing so.
3. Anyone sharing this requirement can introduce it at their level by applying the so-called digressive approach, it being understood that the more digressive agents a society has, the more it will tend to effectively digress.
4. The role of digressive agents is not to characterise human condition, impose laws and obligations on their fellows or execute any form of justice, but to allow everyone to engage with the existence they find most meaningful. They cannot offer solutions to the conflicts they will be led to influence, but can encourage the multiplicity of their possible outcomes. The success of the digressive approach depends equally on their action and the willingness of the parties involved to look for alternatives to that which is imposed on them.
5. Digressive agents have to combat all forms of alienation, that is, the incapacity of any person to determine the nature and meaning of her/his existence. To do so, they can distinguish two forms of alienation: ideological alienation, which I define as an individual's incapacity to conceive of the arbitrary nature of existence as well as its purpose, and the alienating constraint, which I define as a constraint that entirely determines the existence of the person alienated.

The distinction between individuals' total, partial or imaginary incapacity to determine their existence depends on the digressive agents' viewpoint: they have to take responsibility for it and appropriate the concept of alienation in whichever way they feel to be most suitable.

6. Digressive agents cannot avoid characterising, at least a little, the beings whose alienation they are assessing: human corporeity, the reality of the world surrounding them and its logic are vital working hypotheses for them. Even if they define them as inalienable constraints, digressive agents have to keep in mind that these are only realistic hypotheses and not established principles. They cannot disapprove of any beliefs in the light of these constraints, but have no choice other than to draw on them when characterising a state of alienation.
7. To use more positive terms, digressive agents work towards the global maximisation of individual choices, since the restriction of these choices would reveal the presence of still-prevailing principles. However, they must recognise that this calculation is equivocal, and could not justify the alienation of some people with the increased choices it would procure other people. The global maximisation of individual choices and the fight against all forms of alienation that such maximisation allows are ultimately limited by an ontological uncertainty: they evoke an existential quest wherein the least certitude would be fatal to humanity.
8. We refer to a partially alienating constraint (monopoly) to mean a constraint that excludes all alternatives in its sphere. Either this constraint is seen as globally reducing individual choices, in which case digressive agents will encourage the creation of alternatives. Or it cannot be dismantled, or is considered to offer overall more individual choices than its dismantling, in which case digressive agents will demand that it is at least conciliated, that is, exercised in such a way that it maximises individual choices in other spheres of existence.
9. A wholly alienating constraint, that is, that not only excludes all alternatives in its sphere, but also entirely determines an individual's existence, cannot be tolerated since it deprives the person alienated of an infinity of choices within his/her existence, and thereby all humanity of the alterity s/he may have embodied. The person alienated cannot conciliate a constraint of this kind since it deprives her/him of all margin for manoeuvre. It follows that a wholly alienating constraint has necessarily to be dismantled.

10. If digressive agents arrive at opposing conclusions concerning the conciliation or dismantling of an alienating constraint, because they disagree either on the weight to be given to certain individual choices or on the characterisation of a form of alienation, then they have to apply the digressive approach to the monopoly formed by their own appraisal: if they feel that they do not need to agree to globally maximise individual choices, then they can decide not to take on board their fellow agents' opinions. If, on the other hand, they feel that certain intrinsic restrictions on the real make their agreement necessary, or at least make it preferable in terms of the choices offered to humanity, they then have to conciliate their viewpoints on the most suitable way of applying the digressive approach to the case in question.
11. The digressive approach brings us face to face with the paradoxical condition of human existence. Since the dismantling of alienating constraints is not always possible or advantageous, and that their conciliation can only be subjective, it follows that it will never be possible to decree that a society effectively maximises individual choices, or that this optimal situation can only take one form.

Far from being sterile, the principle that no one is allowed to impose a principle on others leads to interesting conclusions in numerous areas of human activity. Digressive agents therefore have to instigate the appeals for action below and interpret them according to the various political, economic, social and cultural contexts.

### **In the educational sphere**

Parents, teachers, starting today, do not consider your teaching to be finished unless your pupils are capable of relativizing it; teach them to take a critical stance towards, among other, the discourses proclaimed in the public space; allow young people to experiment with different forms of relationship with the world, prepare them for a multitude of activities, including political, association-based, economic, cultural, family, spiritual and artistic pursuits.

Politicians, legislators, do not allow an educational establishment to exclusively pursue elitism, economic profitability or any other norm: either other schools must exist nearby pursuing different objectives – public, private, economic, political or religious in nature – with each school having to allow its pupils to relativize its particular objectives, or no alternative is proposed and the establishment in question will have to conciliate everyone's viewpoints on the education provided there.

### **In the health sphere**

Patients, doctors and other healthcare professionals, starting today, stop seeing illness as a deviation from so-called normality, but treat individuals whose existence is reduced by illness to categorised symptoms, and thus predetermined behaviour, with the aim of restoring the unpredictable nature of their existence.

Politicians, legislators, encourage either a multiplicity of health organisations so that no ill people find themselves determined by the goals pursued by one of them, or the conciliation of as many viewpoints as possible on the treatment they offer, including the conciliation of economic imperatives with the social and ethical issues inherent to medicine, or the conciliation of universal healthcare access with specific cultural or religious requests.

Know that, to take one example, your administration of pharmaceutical patents and of the companies behind them is only rooted in our conviction that you are the best placed to conciliate their use, that is, to provide the broadest possible access to medical treatment. The legal time limit prescribing when a patent enters the public domain would be one tool among others to organise this conciliation in practical terms.

### **In the cultural and learning sphere**

All of you, you have always been responsible for the meaning you give to things, to your existence and to that of others. Get involved starting today in the public space, the discourse proclaimed there and the use made of it. Reject all art imposed on you without ever winning you over, all expertise not subject to debate and all advertising that is unassailable.

Politicians, legislators, the act of expressing ourselves should entail the desire to engage in an exchange of more or less conflictual viewpoints whose outcome we can never totally control. Use your authority either to encourage this diversity of expressed opinions, or take position on a discourse, but without ever being able to impose it in the public space. Only allocate your subsidies and distribute your honours if they are subject to competition, without which you should only seek to conciliate all the different opinions expressed by your population.

Institutional heads, allow the multiplicity of your institutions, the values they transmit and their mode of operation. Liberate experts from their role of consultants whom the political and economic authorities turn to when it suits them, and encourage them to establish direction relationships with the public. Expertise, including journalistic, artistic, scientific, economic and political expertise, has to be debated at two levels: within the group of experts in order to select the information produced, and, just as essentially, outside the group so the public can judge the worth of the internal debate over selection. You could, of course, decide to take respon-

sibility for your endorsement of a group of experts, but in this event you should not be able to impose their opinions on your fellow citizens; their expertise should be subject to public debate and not presented as technocratic truth.

Heads of private and public companies, all advertisements displayed in the public space, whether commercial or not, should be subject to a dialectical framework: an advertisement should not be displayed unless the reactions it arouses are also displayed; one way of establishing this kind of public debate would be to allocate half of the advertising space, at the expense of the advertisers, to the reactions produced by the message they were seeking to bring to public attention. The goal of this framework would not be to condemn advertising, but instead to give it a new boost and encourage its audience to engage with it anew, to cleanse advertising discourse and, through it, the entire economy.

### **In the economic and working sphere**

Workers, consumers, as soon as it becomes meaningful to you, transfer some of the time you spend on the ordinary economy — whether on paid or leisure activities — to other forms of cooperation. Recognise that no activity, and no material good, has to necessarily transit via the ordinary economy; which is not to say that this economy needs to be avoided, but it would benefit from being put into competition with other scales of values.

Media, universities, consultancies and other groups of experts, many alternatives to the ordinary economy already exist, but we do not pay them as much attention, which is why they lose out to a purely consumerist relationship with the real. Avoid taking the easy option of always breaking down society according to financial income, and instead apply other and equally pertinent interpretations. Publicise the work carried out by not-for-profit organisations as well as private companies, freely accessible cultural productions as well as blockbusters, and qualitative as well quantitative comments on the state of your societies.

Politicians, legislators, imposing an intensive regime of whatever kind on humans can never generate as much wealth as the self-determination this intensiveness takes away from them; human activity would only benefit from a situation whereby everyone could dedicate themselves more easily to those things that held meaning for them. Allow your fellow citizens the leisure to motivate their existence however they wish. This form of leisure would apply to paid work, even if it meant making it less intensive, as well as to leisure activities, even if it meant giving them more meaning. Allow competition between scales of values, currencies, foreign exchange markets, formal and informal, mainstream and alternative economies when they offer more choice for human existence; conciliate, particularly with regulation and tax, any scale of values when it offers more choice to humanity than its dismantling. Give back meaning to your economies at

the international level, opt for monetary divergence rather than convergence, cultivate the semantic singularity of your money, employ it to form truly alternative currencies whose use you could promote throughout the world. Those of you who are privileged, behave in a conciliating manner when it comes to your privileges because your merits are all relative. Exclusivity, when it concerns irreplaceable cultural, natural or intellectual goods, must be conciliated, that is, must produce a bidirectional constraint: anyone wanting access to them would of course have to deal with their administrators, but in return, the administrators would have to deal with each of the requests received. Owners can only enjoy use of their property, whether real estate, intellectual or financial, when it does not constitute a monopoly. Where this is not the case, they either have to facilitate the emergence of alternatives, or demonstrate that they are best placed to conciliate the monopoly.

Heads of private and public companies, within a context based on multi-competition, your companies will have no choice than to open up to a broader range of forms of cooperation in order to maintain production. Starting today, motivate people's participation with arguments other than the purely financial, make them understand the scope of their participation and call on their solidarity. Everyone would then be free to decide that their participation still consisted of a full-time job, but within which their aspirations and economic necessities would be conciliated, or to disassociate the two objectives and have their volunteer activities coexist with their paid activities; it is essential that they do not end up alienated by an intensive production rhythm.

### **In the legal sphere**

Citizens, starting today, take responsibility for your engagements: those with others, with the form of justice you submit to and with any other bodies in charge of ensuring your principles are respected. If you engage with a relationship — a work contract, marriage or loan — that you see as instrumental to your personal aspirations and wish to let yourselves be constrained — though never totally — by the network that underpins it, and are fully aware of the alternatives that should exist, then you will have to content yourselves with the outcome of your balances of power.

Politicians, judges, legislators, when your judgement is required, conciliate the various conceptions of justice expressed by your population; prevent and, where possible, find a solution for the alienation of your citizens; encourage, or at least allow, a maximum of family, political, economic, social, ideological and cultural alternatives, without which individual choice would not be effective. In particular, rejoice in the diversity of cultural, social and professional discriminations, since they give everyone the chance for freer self-determination. Combat them when they converge, become systematic or definitive, that is, when they force us to submit

to affiliations we have not chosen.

Understand that it is because sentenced people are part and parcel of your society and not because they are excluded from it that your law applies to them. Condemning them to death, destitution or any state considered as reducing their choices to nothing cannot be tolerated, since it would deprive them of their capacity to determine their existence. This implies, in particular, that their incarceration incorporates their aspirations as far as possible (and thus allows them, for example, to take part in your elections), or at least that they can choose it, i.e. that other viable alternatives are available to them, including within other jurisdictions.

### **In the political sphere**

Citizens, starting today, become politically engaged, form pressure groups and political parties, encourage others to get involved, on condition that your projects are open to competition. Do not give direction to your country, by adopting engaged laws, imposing a certain social order or form of economy, unless its sovereignty can be relativized, that is, its borders are permeable and mobile. The more constrained your fellow citizens are in their movements, the more conciliating you have to be; the more permeable and mobile your state borders, the more you will be able to apply your principles there. The notion of the state is meaningless unless it is recognised as promoting a distinctive agenda (nation-state), or at least serves as a space for encounters where people can reconcile their own agendas (sovereign state).

Politicians, legislators, get your fellow citizens involved in a dynamic process of national identification or of power conciliation; the reality of this process means that you will have to pursue both, at least partially. Do not seek to bring order to the public space (administered space) unless all your fellow citizens wish for such order, which entails the existence of another, conciliated space (strictly public space) where they can confront their viewpoints.

Consider democracy not as an instrument for legitimising your authority, but as a means for conciliating the diverse aspirations of your population. This conciliation can be carried out by means of the following processes: establishment of a parliamentary regime, elections for a parliament using proportional representation, voting by a qualified majority, the exercise of so-called conventional power, and appealing to a digressive-type constitutional council in the event of irreconcilable positions; this appeal could, as a last resort, result in a split of power by the council, for example, in the form of community federalism.

Behave in a conciliating manner towards all types of authority different to your own within a digressive world order: the most inclusive of orders, since it would not establish conventions unless they were felt to be indispensable to allowing everyone to determine the nature and meaning of their existence.

### **In the environmental sphere**

All of you, the plant and animal world is subject to multiple interpretations and uses just like everything else on earth. Nature can be a place of discovery, sports ground, mythical or religious being, scientific object or source of danger and pleasure. None of these uses is intrinsically more appropriate than another, they are the fruit of a subjective appropriation of the real. The intensive exploitation of natural resources, as well as of the plant and animal world, is symptomatic of the determinist vision wherein humans have imprisoned themselves; resolving this situation would equate to extricating us from our state of alienation.

Deforestation, intensive fishing, excessive use of ground water and oil resources, global warming and air pollution are just a few examples of the phenomena caused by the ruthless appropriation of goods that are irreplaceable for humanity.

Exploitation of these goods absolutely has to be conciliated. The emergence of alternative economies and the diversification of scales of values will allow us to relativize the economic principles whose monopoly threatens our existence. The dialectical framework of advertising discourse will give us back control over our lifestyles. And the public debate that lobbies and their experts should never have been exempt from will allow us to put their arguments back into context.

If enough digressive agents contribute to this blueprint for society, we may quite possibly be able to free ourselves from all forms of alienation and thereby restore true meaning to our existence.

### **References**

Bruchansky, C. (2015). *Digressive society*. Retrieved from <http://bruchansky.name/digressive-society/>