

## CHAPTER TWENTY

### The Cultivation of Conspiracy\*

Ivan Illich

On November 16, 1996, I arrived at the library auditorium of Bremen University just in time for my afternoon lecture. For five years I had commented on old texts to trace the long history of Western *philia*, of friendship. This semester's theme was the loss of the common sense for proportionality during the lifetimes of John Locke, Gottfried Leibniz, and Johann Sebastian Bach. On that day I wanted to address common sense as the sense organ believed to recognize the "good," the "fit," and the "fifth." But even before I could start I had to stop: The roughly two hundred auditors had planned a party instead of a lecture. Two months after the actual day, they had decided to celebrate my seventieth birthday, so we feasted and laughed and danced until midnight.

Speeches launched the affair. I was seated behind a bouquet, in the first row, and listened to seventeen talks. As a sign of recognition, I presented a flower to each encomiast. Most speakers were over fifty, friends I had made on four continents, a few with reminiscences reaching back to the 1950s in New York. Others were acquaintances made while teaching in Kassel, Berlin, Marburg, Oldenburg, and, since 1991, in Bremen. As I grappled for the expression of gratitude fitting each speaker, I felt like Hugh of St. Victor, my teacher. This twelfth-century monk in a letter compares himself to a basket-bearing donkey: not weighed down but lifted by the burden of friendships gathered on life's pilgrimage.

From the *laudationes* at the library we moved across the plaza to the liberal arts building, whose bleak cement hallways I habitually avoid. A metamorphosis had occurred in its atmosphere. We found ourselves in a quaint café: some five dozen small tables, each with a lighted candle on a colored napkin. For the occasion, the university

---

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

department of domestic science had squeezed a pot into the semester's budget, a pot large enough to cook potato soup for a company. The chancellor, absent on business in Beijing, had hired a Klezmer ensemble. Ludolf Kuchenbuch, dean of historians at a nearby university and a saxophonist, took charge of the jazz. A couple of clowns performing on a bicycle entertained us with their parody of my 1972 book *Energy and Equity*.

The mayor-governor of the city-state Bremen had picked a very old Burgundy from the treasures of the *Rathskeller*. The lanky and towering official handed me the precious gift and expressed his pleasure "that Illich at seventy, in his own words, had found in Bremen 'einen Zipfel Heimat,'" something like "the tail end of an abode." On the lips of the *Bürgermeister*, my expression seemed grotesque, but still true. I began to reflect: How could I have been induced to connect the notion of home with the long dark winters of continual rain, where I walk through the pastures along the Wümme that are flooded twice a day by the tide from the North Atlantic? I who, as a boy, had felt exiled in Vienna, because all my senses were longingly attached to the South, to the blue Adriatic, to the limestone mountains in the Dalmatia of my early childhood.

Today's ceremony, however, is even more startling than the previous revelry, because your award makes me feel welcomed by the citizenry rather than just by a city father. Villa Ichon is a manifestation of Bremen's civility: neither private charity nor public agency. You, who are my hosts in this place, define yourselves as Hanseatic merchant citizens. On the day Villa Ichon was solemnly opened, you pointedly refused to let a city official touch the keys to this house, this "houseboat for the uninsured and vulnerable among us," as Klaus Hübotter has called it. By insisting on your autonomy you stressed the respectful distance of civil society from the city's government. I am touched that this annual award, meant to honor a Bremen citizen, should today go to an errant pilgrim, but one who knows how to appreciate it. As the eldest son of a merchant family in a free port city—one that was caught between the contesting powers of Byzantium and Venice—I was born into a tradition which, in the meantime, has petered out, but not without leaving me sensitive to the flavor of the Hanseatic hospitality you offer.

I first heard of Bremen when I was six, in the stories told me by my drawing teacher, who came from one of your patrician families, and in Vienna was homesick for the north. I adopted the tiny, black-dressed lady as Mama Pfeiffer-Kulenkampf. One summer she came along with us to Dalmatia, to paint; her watercolors still grace my brother's study. From her I learned how to mix different pigments for the contrasting atmospheres of a Mediterranean and an Atlantic shore.

Now, a long lifetime later, I am at home in her salty gray climate. And not just at home; I fancy that my presence has added something to the atmosphere of Bremen University. When Dean Johannes Beck led me from the *aula* through the rainy plaza into the makeshift café, he made a remark that I accepted as a gift. "Ivan," he said,

"this feels like an overflow of Barbara Duden's house." Dean Beck put into words the accomplishment of something I had aimed at for decades: the plethora of our dining room conviviality inspiring a university *aula*; the aura of hospitality in our Kreflingstrasse house felt well beyond its threshold.

Even before my first Bremen semester started, Barbara Duden got a house in the Ostertor Viertel, beyond the old moat, just down from the drug corner, the farmers market, and the Turkish quarter. There Barbara created an ambiance of austere playfulness. The house became a place that at the drop of a hat accommodates our guests. If, after my lecture on Fridays, the spaghetti bowl must feed more than the two dozen who fit around the table made from flooring timber, guests squat on Mexican blankets in the next room.

Over the years, Kreflingstrasse has fostered privileged closeness in respectful, disciplined, critical intercourse—friendships between old acquaintances who drop in from far away and new ones, three, even four decades younger than my oldest companion, Lee Hoinacki, who shares his room with our encyclopedias. Friendship makes ties unique, but some more than others bear the burden of the host: Kassandra, who lives elsewhere, with a key to the house, brings flowers; and Matthias, the virtuoso drummer who lives downstairs in a room that opens on the tiny garden, belong to the dozen who graciously welcome the newcomer at the threshold, stir the soup, orient conversation, do the dishes, and . . . correct my manuscripts as well as those of one another.

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—and it's even more true today—that a "monastic" ambiance 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, such as renouncing systems analysis while typing on my Toshiba.

My early suspicion that a certain atmosphere was necessary 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, 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 poisons sterilize aura." The *casita* on the road to Adjuntas soon became so obnoxious that I had to leave the island.

This freed me to start a "thinkery" in Mexico, which five years later turned into the Centro Intercultural de Documentación or CIDOC. In his introductory talk for today's celebration, Bundestag deputy Freimut Duve told you about it. In those distant years, Duve was an editor at Rowohlt Publishers, cared for the publication of my books in German, and several times visited me 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 it had become fashionable, questioned the innocence of "development." Only the mood that Duve hinted at can explain the disproportionate influence this small center exerted in challenging the benefits of socioeconomic development.

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 Valentina Borremans, who had organized and directed CIDOC from its inception. He then spoke about his admiration for the style in which she ended its work with the mutual consent of its sixty-three collaborators. She realized 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 climate of CIDOC had provided a unique forum. They thrived in the aura of CIDOC, and wholly rejected our certainty that atmosphere invites the institutionalization that will corrupt it. You never know what will nurture the spirit of *philia*, while you can be certain what will smother 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 understand this. In Mexico, I recently opened the mayor's bottle of Burgundy with Valentina to celebrate one of them. We drank the wine to the memory of Alejandro Del Corro, a deceased Argentine Jesuit who lived and worked with me in the early sixties. With his Leica he traveled around South America, collaborating with *guerrilleros* to save their archives for history. Alejandro was a master at moderating aura. When he presided, his delicate attention—whether toward a U.S. civil servant, trash collector, *guerrillero*, or professor—meant that each felt at home with the other around the CIDOC table. Alejandro knew that you cannot lay a claim on aura; he knew about the evanescence of atmosphere.

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 or her aura, you cannot 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 mid-1950s, on my way to meet Carlos, 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, with a shock, I suddenly understood 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 skin, as they put up with the old, the crippled, and idiots in their homes. It was the time before Xerox, fax, and email. 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 dare 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 stench 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. 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 1970s, group dynamics, retreats, and psychic training, all to generate an 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 the insight. In 1986, a few dozen peace research groups 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: *fūdo*. My teacher, Professor Tamanoy, explained *fūdo* 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 *fūdo*. It was easy to explain that both Athenian *philia* and *Pax Romana*, as different as they are from each other, are incomparable to *fūdo*. 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.

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 latecomer 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 con-spiracy, 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 nonhierarchical 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.

I could no more avoid telling the story in Yokohama than today in Bremen. Why? Because the very idea of peace understood as 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 a *conspiratio*, the historical uniqueness of a city's climate, atmosphere,

or spirit also 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 one another. 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*, is peace, understood as the community that arises from it.

Historians have often pointed out that the idea of a social contract, which dominates political thinking in Europe since the fourteenth 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 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 *conjuratio*, 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. Conjuratio, or the swearing together by a common oath confirmed by the invocation of God, just like the liturgical *osculum*, is of Christian origin. The *conjuratio* that 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 *conjuratio*, two equally unique concepts inherited from the first millennium of Christian history are intertwined, but the contractual formality soon overshadowed the spiritual substance.

The medieval town of central Europe was indeed a profoundly new historical gestalt; the *conjuratio conspirativa* makes European urbanity distinct from urban modes elsewhere. It also 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 flowers 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.

This long reflection on the historical precedents to the cultivation of atmosphere in late twentieth-century Bremen seemed necessary to me to defend its intrinsically conspiratorial nature. I wanted to show why independent criticism of the

established order of our modern, technogene, information-centered society can only grow out of a milieu of intense hospitality.

As a scholar I have been shaped by monastic traditions and the interpretation of medieval texts. Early on I concluded that the principal condition for an atmosphere 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.

Bremen, Germany, and Ocotepc, Mexico

Gesine  
formati  
braries  
returne  
Advanc  
taught t  
burg du  
there. I  
in conj

Marion  
John C  
firm pu  
roughs,  
diguet,  
eventu  
Kenzab  
social c  
Marior  
lishing  
English

Eugene  
navaca  
Waltha  
In the  
certain

PENNSTATE



SMEAL College of Business  
Accounting Department

**FAX**

To: \_\_\_\_\_

From: \_\_\_\_\_