Ivan Illich: A Philosophy of Limits

by Humberto Beck

The Illichian project as a whole—from its critique of the economy and technology to the outline of rehabilitation of the vernacular—assumes a vision of the modern world as the scene of a formidable drama between two antagonistic principles: the ideology of progress and the multidimensional balance of human life. Progress and its industrial mentality threaten every dimension of this equilibrium, every scale appropriate for coexistence: the destruction of the environment ruins harmony with nature, industrial monopolies undermine autonomy, educational over programming undermines knowledge and creativity, social polarization cancels equity and the possibility of politics, and technological acceleration invalidates recourse to tradition. Above all, modernization destroys that scale of social coexistence that Illich calls the "balance of action": the proportional relationship between means and ends, between human beings, their products, and their tools. From the postulation of these boundaries that favor social coexistence and from the identification of the risk that economic growth represents for each of them, Illich derives a systematic theory of modernity. The originality of this theory consists in integrating as its most characteristic element just that principle that has been perceived historically as the primary antagonist of modernity: the idea of *limits*.

"The equilibrium of life," writes Illich in *Tools for Conviviality*, "expands in various dimensions and, fragile and complex, does not transgress certain boundaries. Some

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thresholds must not be crossed."[1] So far, technological civilization has been founded on denying the need to recognize these boundaries "within which the human phenomenon remains viable."[2] The Illichian diagnosis is that the modern project of transgressing boundaries and transforming the human condition—the "industrialization of desire"—is predestined to failure: it provokes Nemesis, the force unleashed by the immoderate ambition of limitless progress. Nemesis adds yet another layer to human suffering, beyond exploitation and violence: a new kind of malaise that is the consequence of progress, a byproduct of institutions initially designed to protect humanity from the elements: "The greater the economic progress of any collectivity, the greater the part played by industrial Nemesis in pain, hindrance, discrimination, and death. The more intense the security that is placed in dependency-producing techniques, the greater the rate of waste, degradation, and pathogenesis that must be attacked even by other techniques, and the greater the active force employed in the disposal of garbage, the handling of waste, and the treatment of people whom progress has rendered superfluous."[3]

For Illich, the transgression of limits initiates a *negative dialectic of modernity,* whose name is Nemesis: the combined effect of the collateral results of modernization and all its successive corrective modernizations. The state of this negative dialectic is a calamity composed of the secondary effects and counter-effects of modernization, which only accrue because it does not occur to anyone that the way out of the chain of troubles could be not more but less modernity. In her work

1 Ivan Illich, *La convivencialidad*, en *Obras reunidas I* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2006), 373.

2 Ivan Illich, *Alternativas*, en *Obras reunidas I* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2006), 177.

3 Ivan Illich, *Némesis médica*, en *Obras reunidas I* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2006), 752.

of the same name, Hannah Arendt includes in the notion of the *human condition* both "the situations under which life has been given to man on earth"—birth and mortality, worldliness, a plurality—and the circumstances created by human beings themselves. These circumstances are endowed with the same conditioning power as nature. From this perspective, Nemesis could be interpreted as the negative conditioning power of the human-made environment, and conviviality as the optimization of that power in favor of the freedom and autonomy of the human, its capacity to "constitute a beginning."[4]

For Illich, the very notion of *culture* is identical to the set of socially accepted arrangements on the form and limits of human action, such as the rules for dealing with pain, illness, and death and the conditions for excluding certain activities from the sphere of scarcity and exchange. Human beings are the only animals capable of consciously adapting to their environment and, therefore, the only ones capable of designing the form of their relations with the environment and other human beings. This adaptation implies an acceptance of limits. The industrial order, however, precisely implies the destruction of cultural forms, that is, of all those traditions of a local organization that create and preserve a balance between a particular place, its population, and its tools. Modernity is, in essence, the act of demolishing these cultural forms through delocalization. In this process, modern institutions, such as the market economy and industrial production, extract social relations from their particular contexts to restructure them in an indefinite space-time.[5]

Industrial production and its radicalization by Nemesis put at risk those scales and balances that have constituted

4 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 2-3.

5 Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).

the basis for the historical forms of the human. The fundamental Illichian proposition behind the idea of limits is, then, the premise that human has a *form*. In Illich, the form of the human is not, as for Foucault, a "recent invention" of the human sciences, but the notion of certain correspondence between environmental and social aspects, a certain proportion in the links between the individual, the community, and nature. We call this certain balance of biological, historical, and cultural factors "human beings." Technological interventions are beneficial only to the extent that they enhance the flourishing of humans without breaking the limits of this balance that shapes it.

In the contemporary world, the concept of the human is at stake. It may disappear, not so much "erased, like a face drawn on the sand at the seashore," but disintegrated by industrial modernity, which is based on the promise of the disappearance of all limits. In contrast, in traditional societies, there is a certain proportion between the "here" of human action and a non-manipulable "there." Although the modern world is born out of a critique of that "there," its substance does not disappear. Still, it is transposed into the secular infinities of endless desire or the indefinite plasticity of the human.

As his reflections on economics reveal, the main question behind Illich's work can be posed as follows: how to reconstitute, in the modern context, the arrangement of cultural forms? To answer this, Illich proposes the study of social morphology: the notion that there is a correspondence between the form and the size of social entities. The fundamental concept of social morphology is, as in the language of the good, proportionality—the question of what is proper to a particular situation. Proportionality is the inverse of hubris. It is the idea that things are inhabited by a propensity toward their good and that this "sensibility toward the proper" is the

necessary condition of friendship and political life. From proportionality derives a perception of "the human condition as that ever unique and contour-creating boundary within which each community can argue about what should be permitted and what should be excluded" from life in common.[6]

In traditional societies, myth was the element that established the limits of that form and discouraged extreme ambition and the desire for transgression. But, in the new circumstances, the solution can no longer come from mythology. Whatever attempts there may be in that direction, a renewed awareness of limits cannot come from a restoration of the sacred but only from new politics. In modern societies, the question of the limits of human action can only be answered rationally by recognizing natural thresholds and determining social contours through democratic procedures. "Politically established limits to industrial growth," says Illich, "will have to take the place of mythological boundaries."[7]

In many ways, the Illichian proposal of limits represents a form of "immanent critique," that form of social contestation based on identifying the internal contradictions of a given society—the conflict between its discursive pretensions and its actual results—to imagine other possibilities that transcend the contradictions. In this sense, one can think of the Illichian critique of modernity as an enterprise analogous to the Frankfurt School project of critical theory, the main historical incarnation of the methods of immanent critique. In its various formulations—works such as Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944—1947), Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), and Jürgen Habermas' *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981)—critical theory has set out to identify the

6 Ivan Illich, "The Wisdom of Leopold Kohr", in *La Perte des sens* (Paris: Fayard, 2004), 237.

7 *Némesis médica*, 750.

relations between modernity and its "pathological" manifestations expressed in phenomena such as the degradation of culture or the reification of social relations. The authors of the Frankfurt School varied in their diagnoses: from the establishment of an irrevocable identity between instrumental reason and domination, that is, between modernity and its pathologies (Horkheimer and Adorno), to the proposal that these pathologies are potentially surmountable by further developments of modern logic itself, such as the replacement of instrumental reason by a form of "communicative" rationality (Habermas).

There are evident parallels between the Frankfurt School project and the Illichian methodology of the critique of technology and the economy. Habermas, for example, identifies as the central objects of critical theory the state and capitalism as systems of rationalization that, by mutually reinforcing each other, subject social life to the logic of efficiency and control and end up collapsing the boundaries between the "system" and the "lifeworld"; he perceives in the political and cultural mobilizations of the 1960s attempts by citizens to resist this invasion of the lifeworld by the system and its "government of administrators."[8] Habermas' characterization could align with Illich's approach on more than one point. Thus, if we were to resort to the language of critical theory to characterize Illich's work, this work could be presented as an analysis of the pathologies of modernity from a critique of industrialism. The main pathology identified by Illich would be the mutation in the condition of instrumentality, which, taken to its ultimate consequences, would become an end in itself, thus subverting its original meaning and doing away with any possibility of authentic human autonomy.

It is possible to compare not only in conceptual but

8 Jürgen Habermas, "Las tareas de una teoría crítica de la sociedad", in *Teoría de la acción comunicativa* (Madrid: Trotta, 2014), 904-944.

also in historical terms the critical enterprises of Illich and the Frankfurt School. On the one hand, critical theory was born in a context determined by the triumph of fascism, the eclipse of the workers' movement, and the rise of mass culture. On the other hand, Illich's critique of modernity was marked by the end of the years of post-war economic expansion, the genesis and spread of the development project in the Third World, the energy crises, and the emergence of new social movements critical of bureaucracy and capitalism around 1968. In a certain sense, a part of what the Frankfurt School carried out in the circumstances of the rise of totalitarianism in Europe in the 1930s and the consolidation of liberal capitalism in the 1950s was repeated—in its terms and with its categories—by Illich with respect to the international development project and the crises of industrial capitalism during the 1970s. Taking into account these affinities and differences, perhaps one should speak of Illich's work as a Cuernavaca School of critical studies of modernity integrated around Illich and the group of intellectual figures that gathered during the sixties and seventies at the Intercultural Center of Documentation (CIDOC) located in that Mexican city.

Although Illich's critique shares with the Frankfurt School the analysis of the development of modern rationality as a process of reification, the answers that both positions deduce from this analysis are radically opposed. The Illichian program represents an alternative to Horkheimer and Adorno's pessimism—modern rationality as a dead end—and to Habermas' optimism—modernity as rationality capable of internally resolving its pathologies. The proposal derived from Illich's critique consists of 1) a *convivial reconstruction of society*, which rethinks the meaning of modernity and progress by operating an inversion in the relations between means and ends, the subject and its instruments, and 2) a *revindication of the commons*, that is, the integration of the reality outside the

economic sphere into the modern project of human autonomy.

Horkheimer points out that "reason will not be able to become transparent to itself as long as men continue to act as members of an organism that lacks reason."[9] By making explicit the tensions between autonomy and instrumentality in modernity, observing them in "the mirror of the past" and from the point of view of limits, Illich contributed to the task of "making reason transparent to itself", to the work of endowing with critical faculties that sometimes unreflective organism which is the modern world.

Despite the possible affinities and parallels with other currents of thought, what is certain is that Ivan Illich's work is inserted in its own tradition, a tradition in a certain sense new, because—as in the case of Kafka's "precursors" pointed out by Borges—the appearance of the body of Illichian ideas has been the very factor that has contributed decisively to configure it. This tradition is the *philosophy of limits*, a line of reflection that assumes attention to thresholds, boundaries, scales, and balances not as an anti-modern attempt but as an enterprise proper to the project of modernity. In this tradition, limits are not only the object of modern critique but also one of its dimensions.

The philosophy of limits is opposed to the great current that has prevailed, in symbolic and practical terms, in the ethos of modernity: the ethics of transgression. Faust, Bacon, and Nietzsche are the avatars of this modernity identified with attacks against limits and forms. A century ago, Oswald Spengler had already identified Western culture with "the Faustian" understood as that orientation towards the longing for an unattainable space, unlimited expansion, and the use of science and technology as instruments for the imposition of human

9 Max Horkheimer, "Traditional Theory and Critical Theory", in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), 188-243.

will and the defeat of the physical barriers of the world. Francis Bacon, in turn, by interweaving the quest for knowledge with the power to subdue the environment, identified the collective consciousness of the modern era with the domination of nature from the 17th century onwards. Technology was the instrument of this dominion over resources to guarantee the material provision of human needs. Since then, as William Leiss points out, modern ideologies share the assumption that "the steady increase of human control over natural forces is the material foundation on which the superiority of modern civilization rests."[10] Nietzsche, for his part, articulated the critique of the limit as an invective against the Apollonian. This principle fixed the contours of self and culture through an illusion of form and added the celebration of the Dionysian as the space of the ungovernable flow of the real. For Nietzsche, "man is something that must be overcome"; he thus inaugurated speculation on the plasticity of the human that has been continued in various forms by writers such as André Breton and Antonin Artaud and thinkers such as Georges Bataille and Michel Foucault.

In contrast to the ethics of transgression, the beginnings of the modern philosophy of limits are to be found in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. For Kant, "thinking" is synonymous with establishing the limits of thought and the conditions of the thinkable. But, beyond his epistemology, Kant institutes an impossible boundary between persons and things in his moral philosophy that forms the basis of an ethics of limits. While things are "beings without reason" that deserve a relative value as means, persons are "rational beings" that constitute ends in themselves. From this distinction, Kant derives the categorical imperative and his "formula of humanity": a fundamental ethical duty is never to use anyone's hu-

10 William Leiss, *The Domination of Natur*e (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), xxi, 15-16, 145.

manity as a means to an end. Since the autonomous will of subjects is the only source of morality, the whole edifice of ethics depends on fulfilling this duty—always treating people as ends and never as means. For Kant, the fundamental criterion of morality is establishing a line of demarcation between the spaces of autonomy and instrumentality. Kant calls the "realm of ends" this world of ethics,[11] in which each person recognizes all others as inalienable autonomous beings, and the status of mediality is reserved for objects.

In the twentieth century, the emblematic formulation of the philosophy of limits corresponds to Albert Camus. In *The Rebel*, Camus establishes that all revolt has the moral unity of humanity as its foundation: the refusal to treat any human being as a thing. This foundation based on the unity of humankind imposes a delimitation on the world of history and power. Revolt for Camus, more than a transgression, is the affirmation of a limit, the boundary that marks the common dignity of the human. Every act of freedom, critique of power, or resistance against domination represents an exercise in the awareness of limits. Hence his maxim: "I rebel, therefore we are." Forged in the context of a meditation on the totalitarian drift of Soviet communism, Camus' criticisms can, however, be extrapolated to other incarnations of the ideology of progress as a will to absolute domination over reality. Revolt is a rebellion against the pretensions of those "purely historical universes" that deny the human condition and assume "the certainty of the infinite plasticity of man."[12]

History, for Camus, is not absolute—and Illich would add that neither are the economy, technology, or progress. Absolutes legitimize domination and violence: "Historical reason, whatever the order that founds it, reigns over a universe

11 Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 56.

12 Albert Camus, *L'Homme revolté* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), 311, 297.

of things, not of men." The rebel does not claim total freedom like the revolutionary, but instead calls it into question. The rebel opposes "the unlimited power that authorizes a superior to violate the forbidden frontier"—that frontier constituted, precisely, by the dignity of other human beings. Rebellion also reveals a limit: the idea that there is a *measure* of the human.[13]

In *If This Is a Man*, the memoirs of his time as an inmate in the labor and extermination camps of Nazi Germany, Primo Levi offers a testimony of the violation of this boundary at the hands of the powers of historical reason. In the camps, the prisoners lived in a state of absolute destitution. Existence in these conditions was a succession of episodes of imposed nudity aimed at reducing the body to a pure mass, depriving it of its capacity to be a sign of humanity. This violence was not only a degradation of the body but a disfigurement of the human. The historical experience of the camps represented the "experiment" of looking at the human world from the strangeness of an absolute extreme, the outer space of the non-human. From this radical perspective, it is discovered that, in a century populated by cults of rupture, rebellion consists of, as Camus argues, the preservation of the awareness that the human, despite being an open condition whose nature consists in the negation of nature, has a form.

The ethics of transgression has identified the infringement of limits as the human gesture par excellence. In this logic, one is human only to the extent that a boundary is transgressed because it is presumed that only in this way is the individual affirmed as an artifice opposed to the natural. But even the conventions of form represent a form of discontinuity with the environment: they also constitute, in their way, an elaboration of the human as artificial, different from nature. The real contest lies elsewhere: the contrast between *transgression* and *critique* as two different ways of assuming

13 *L'Homme revolté*, 364, 355, 367.

human self-foundation. Transgression is a celebration of the gesture of rupture—the ritual of tearing the veil as a ceremony of freedom. Critique entails a movement within a certain proportion: the project of building a world of subjects in an enduring environment.

The technological imperative and industrial capitalism embody a mode of the ethics of transgression. But there is the possibility of another modernity that is less transgressive and more, properly speaking, *critical*— Kantian, Camusian, Illichian. The modernity of limits rejects any dominance; it encourages a form of self-scrutiny that, far from being a form of reclusion, opens itself to otherness because it is the foundation of civic life: the free and egalitarian encounter of oneself with others.

Illich's work constitutes, in this sense, a "critique of Faustian reason," a questioning of any project of boundless transformation of human beings and their environment, a rebuke to the sense of dissatisfaction inherent in the modern condition, and an objection to the secular infinities of the economy and progress, those parodies of eternity. It also represents an invitation to reinterpret, for the circumstances of the modern world, the concept of culture as the matrix of the multiple social arrangements appropriate for human flourishing based on the acceptance of certain defining contours.

To critique the technological phenomenon, which also encompasses the economy, it is necessary to situate oneself outside of it, in a zone of experience that technology cannot integrate. Illich found this point of reference in the moral and political principle of autonomy. Only something outside the technological system could serve as an orientation: a secular form of "transcendence"—that of the subject—as a source of freedom. Thus, Illich's analysis does not imply the suppression of technology but rather the program of giving it a new direction: conceiving technology as nothing more than a set of

valuable artifacts, using it while preventing it from using us. His critique calls for creating a consciousness of autonomy capable of destroying the power of instruments over humanity.

In the present circumstances, developing a philosophy of limits would mean the opportunity to perform a fundamental operation—perhaps the most urgent—of contemporary society: reactivation of the political imagination. The application of this philosophy would bring with it neither a way out of modernity nor its overcoming but a reconsideration of its meaning from a perspective that is both radical—because it is relative to its origin, its root—and unprecedented—because it remains invisible to conventional political positions: the discovery of the *modernity of limits*. In a social world marked by the predominance of information and globalization, a politics of limits would be equivalent to imagining, along with other ways of distributing wealth, new forms of distributing knowledge and new modalities for the links between human beings, their tools, and their environment; it would also be tantamount to enunciating a powerful reminder that modernity is founded on its self-criticism.

As it is known, in his notes for the theses "On the Concept of History," Walter Benjamin points out that, despite Marx's statement on revolutions as the "locomotives of history," it is possible to think that revolutionary events represent rather an attempt to stop the advance of the locomotive.[14] Ivan Illich's work can be regarded, in the unbridled trajectory of modernity, as an urgent call to the train passengers—the human species—to activate the emergency brake.

14 Walter Benjamin, "Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History'", in *Selected Writings*, volume 4, 1938-1940 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 402.