

## Leopold Kohr, Initiator of Social Morphology\*

By Ivan Illich

Dear, honored Leopold Kohr,

Here we are, about to have a Salzburg Festival in your honor. I am deeply moved and want to give you thanks at this festive opening for what you have given to many of us, and for having become our teacher. You have always been an unobtrusive teacher. You have always behaved as one who knew that whoever has ears to hear you would sooner or later of necessity stumble upon you. And so, many guests at this festivity have, like myself, stumbled one time or another, and taken away a memento. What was written in these mementoes, and what we have made of them, will be what we shall report here. But you have also always been a witty teacher. Though entirely a son of Oberndorf, in the Salzburg country town of 'Silent Night', your way of teaching was that of a Semite. Like a Rabbi or a Mullah, you avoided putting forward theories and told stories instead. All your life you have spoken and written like one who knows that arguments can end merely in conclusions and only stories make sense. When I read the Gospels, I only know that I have grasped the point when the parable makes me smile, and it is the same with your writings. Your stories form the thread which you have woven, with scientific thoughts, into the fabric of your teaching. In this manner, you have broken open the prosaic framework

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of the science of latter-day. In this way, you wove together the two strands of what is scientifically measured and aesthetically assured, and made this weave the foundation of social morphology. You made us dare still to teach with parables, even in the late twentieth century, to make modern science play the role of commentary. And there is a third thing I want to thank you for: your courageous readiness to be surprised. In the discipline of which I think you are a founder, you have always been one or two decades ahead of us — John Seymour made this beautifully clear. But whenever one of us caught up with you with some elegant deduction, such as ‘that small is beautiful’ — or the thesis ‘that acceleration paralyzes society’ — you were always, more than others, modest enough to be surprised by our seemingly brand-new discoveries, that had been so obvious to you for so long. We honor you for this exemplary humility. It alone made it possible for you to make modesty itself the central object of your researches. I speak, that is, of social modesty as your central research object. In this year of 1982, I purposely avoid the term ‘self-limitation’ because, during the last ten years, self-limitation has become the *theme-celebre* of science. ‘Autopoiesis’ of living or even social systems is the great new land of cybernetics, of theoretical biology, and of the generalized ‘shortageologies’ which go under the name economics. For quite a long time now, some scientists have taken seriously your insight of forty years standing that, whatever is wrong today, it is because it is too big. A compulsion to trivial smallness, scientifically underpinned and permeated by technology, threatens today to become the new ideology, and tries to appropriate your teachings. I call your research project social modesty in order to present this misappropriation. Modesty is not a utilitarian but an ethical-aesthetic motivation for action. The modesty of this Salzburg dreamland of yours is neither genetic — like the self-limitation of a mussel to five turns and not six — nor is

it predetermined by a cybernetic program. It stems from the consciousness of a society that an ambit of say 22 km is best because such people as live in these mountains can fill it with life and enjoy it. It is simply impossible to reduce the feeling for ethical and aesthetical proportion to an objectively calculated span of variations. The common living space of Oberndorf corresponds with a human dimension given by you in your hymn to Salzburg as a radius of 22 km. It is a human environment. Its *reach* cannot be reduced to the *territory* of an animal, nor that of the *radius* of an automobile with shoes on. The measure of this environment is correct because it is capable of being built upon with taste, settled in style, conceived with brain and heart, and celebrated in a local dialect. Not only are field and meadow thus made beautiful, but also the town itself. Your style has the lively simplicity which makes it difficult for socio-biologists or cyberneticians to claim you.

The first thing I learned from you was the importance of quite a simple little word: 'gewiss'. You probably no longer remember the occasion. It was Everett Reimer, at that time my mentor, who introduced me to you. You asked me to your patio in Rio Piedras, and our conversation (with lemonade), drove us from statistical diagrams to the platonic meaning of the just measure. All three of us knew Plato's distinction between the 'ell', which one would use to measure out a size, and the 'logos' through which one comprehends a relationship. This is when you said that such relatedness (or proportions) can exist only, and be beautiful only to a 'certain' extent. Ever since, and more and more compactly, this little word 'certain' permeates my teaching, as it does yours too, and angers many of my colleagues.

Dictionaries do not disguise the ambiguity of this unassuming word. On the one hand, 'gewiss' means sure, firm, certain, indubitable, determined once and for all, 'this way and no other way'. Science seeks certainty in this sense — a

test anyone can make afterwards. The second sense of 'gewiss' runs right across from the first. *Duden's Dictionary* gives it as 'not exactly expressible, difficult to establish or describe, not closely defined, or for decency reasons better left unsaid'. It is in this sense one speaks of a certain share, a certain people, of a certain self-evidence, without which no one can live. Certainty in the first sense comes from a clarified discrimination between 'correct' and 'false', the inquest to be carried on with new means. Certain in the second sense appeals to good taste — 'et de gustibus non est disputandum'.

You speak often indeed of a 'certain' magnitude of society: it is one which can be encompassed as a whole. It is not only you, honored *magister*, who calls this encompassability 'certain' — all wise people call it that. Encompassable is the meaning of the root from which the little word 'certain' stems. And so, social morphology is the quest for that 'certain' order of magnitude within which 'certain' social relationships are beautiful.

To be more precise: may I denote social morphology as research seeking out the subjective limits within which the use of objective-scientific yardsticks can result in sensible insights, proper decisions, and beautiful form? 'Si placet haec definitio', a research neither reducible to science nor without reference to science. For social morphology thus conceived represents a search for the applicability of scientific yardsticks, and thus quite essentially refers to forms of cognition which are objective and universally scientific. On the other hand, this definition lifts social morphology out of the whole array of natural and social sciences, since its job is precisely the tradition-bound, aesthetic, and often even perhaps religious, search for how far science is applicable to a community encompassed subjectively by an historic 'us', a concrete community. The morphology I learned from you is the exploration of the limits within which the subjective social senses

for proportion and beauty makes it desirable for *us* to put up with, or even to make use of, scientific-technological procedures. And in order to be encompassable, a society has to be not only small but also beautiful. Ugliness revolts us, even if small. One refuses to consider it. Smallness and beauty are necessities of life. A small democracy is impossible if it is not beautiful. Forced smallness is always ugly, never encompassable, violates the feeling for life, and simply cries out for more and more police. For a society to 'content itself' with the best is only possible where ethical-ideological sharing of responsibility rests on aesthetic sharing, on a celebration of beauty. The Scholastics of the thirteenth century spoke of beauty as the splendor of goodness: you, Leopold Kohr, speak again and again of beauty as of that which is, *in a certain measure*, the best, because it can be encompassed with pleasure by people imbued by this beauty.

Up to this point, dear honored friend, I have spoken as a pupil to you. I have tried to profess *how* I understand *you*. From here onwards, I would like to report *to where* I am led now by the research into social modesty. Just as you have built upon Darcy Thompson and John Haldane, and made their biological morphology the starting point of a social morphology, so would I too like to answer the questions raised by your representation.

Ever since *Breakdown of Nations* was published, that is for 40 years, you have been working on the mutual conditioning of social measure and social form. I am driven by curiosity to discover the fundamental formal principle which enables a surviving traditional society, — nay, all of them — to restrain itself in modesty with regard to the order of magnitude of its spaces, rhythms, goals, and means. This is to say, that if I do not succeed in finding such an independent, characteristic principle of social morphology, the theory and practice of modesty will remain open to the danger of being

interpreted either cybernetically, i.e. in the last resort mechanistic, or utilitarian, i.e. as economically optimized, or even voluntaristically, ultimately professionally, as architecture. Neither the binary code of atomic physics, nor the thermodynamics of theoretical biology, nor even the duality of spirit and matter in which architects wallow, can give me the *certain complementariness* which is the weft and warp of live social patterns.

For this reason, I begin my reflections with the study of the 'Kohr'. A Kohr — you will surely forgive my usurping of your family name in the service of social morphology — is not an area but a reach, not a size but a dimension and reflects that feeling of life you point to by your 22 km, that is the four walking or one-and-a-half cycling hours between Oberndorf and Salzburg. Thus I confront metric units diametrically, but also only 'to a certain extent', with the Kohr.

Schumacher has implicitly formulated the thesis that only a world made up of Kohrs can be beautiful. You gave richer content to the definition of beauty. You said that things humanly just are also *sybaritic*. You refer here to the cookery book of Athenaeus which explains that legendary opulence of the city of Sybaris by the fact that its coast, in contrast to those in Athens or Corinth, does not suit harbor installations or commerce and that therefore the Sybarities have to enjoy everything they produce themselves. And so, life in a humanly just reach is — characteristically — a joy. But all forms of experience which I, and people like myself, would call enjoyment, contain of necessity a duality. Not the sum of one plus one, but a certain duality, never expressible with exactitude, difficult to identity, not to be closely characterized, and for fateful reasons better wrapped in silence — this is at the root of our enjoyment of modesty, of social frugality. Consequently, the Kohr is not a term for a measure but for the reach of a quite certain duality. And what is the substance, in the final count, of this

specifically social duality? I seek and find it that same as any other reasonable human surely would too: enjoyment.

You see, the question I put to myself is this: what is it that makes one Kohr distinguishable from another, and every Kohr homogeneous in itself? And I believe it is to be found in the principle expressible in the English word 'gender', in German 'genus'. Nowhere can one find a homogeneously formed ensemble of men and women to extend beyond a whole Kohr. A Kohr is the morphological term for a unique, vernacular correlation of the sexes. Men and women work out their system of who uses which implement in the most harmonious manner within the confines of one Kohr. In one particular Kohr, only men use the scythe and women the sickle, and the local patron saint will see to it that it should stay so. In the next Kohr, women too will take up the scythe, but only when making hay, and only in the second mowing. The reach of the Kohr is fixed by this quite certain and definite yet not quite comprehensible, asymmetrical complementarity between what is socially stamped as masculine and as feminine spheres. I owe it in part to my Salzburg studies, this understanding of the vernacular Kohr as the term for a self-restraint to a characteristic correlation of the sexes, a singular gender-formation. What helped me were the comments of my doctoral patron Auer to the epistle of Augustinus to Paulina, the seminar on the womb and the umbilical cord in the religious ethnography course of Professor Rudolf Kriss, and the many years with two colleagues from Salzburg times, Lenz and Ruth Kriss-Rettenbeck. But for the thorn of curiosity which goaded me to find in the duality of social gender a this worldly reflection of the *relatio subsistens* — for this, LAUS TIBI DOMINE.