

Renewing *La Convivialité*, a half century later

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Forgetting

We seem to have forgotten the questions raised fifty years ago by Ivan Illich in *La Convivialité*¹. Yet, we face them again today with a renewed sense of urgency. To adequately confront the new provocations to which humanity itself is now subjected, we need an anthropology that clearly traces the *a priori* of the human phenomenon and unveils its ethical horizon. Fifty years ago, Illich imagined a possible future that is uncannily similar to our present:

It may be that the technocrats are responsible for leading the flock to the brink of the abyss [...] Such a suicidal fantasy would maintain the industrial system at the highest level of productivity that is sustainable. Man would live protected in a plastic bubble.²

He further foresaw that to overcome human resistance to programming and manipulation:

science and technology would focus on equipping the human psyche. From birth to death, humanity would be confined in the permanent school extended on a world scale, treated for life in the great world-wide hospital and

1 For this article, I rely on I. Illich (2005), *La Convivialité*; in *Oeuvres complètes, I*, (Paris: Fayard, 2005).

2 I. Illich, *La Convivialité*, cit., pp. 569-570. (Il se peut que les technocrates soient chargés de conduire le troupeau au bord de l'abîme [...] Une telle fantaisie suicidaire maintiendrait le système industriel au plus haut degré de productivité qui soit endurable. L'homme vivrait protégé dans une bulle de plastique).

linked night and day to implacable chains of communication. This is how the world of the Great Organization would function.³

If on the one hand Illich saw far ahead, on the other hand he seems to have erred in being too optimistic in thinking that “the previous failures of mass therapies also give hope for the failure of this ultimate project of planetary control.”⁴

Fifty years ago, the widespread sense of impotence was a sign of the silence of parties, legislative bodies, and the judiciary who were trapped by the logic of infinite growth. At that moment of systemic crisis (which Illich thought was looming), influential minorities and custodians of radical research could have guided the world’s majorities. The coming to awareness of the addicted masses could have occurred suddenly. At that time, Illich spoke of the possibility of a surprising revolution capable of impacting the Law and negotiating proscriptions on a global scale to keep technological development below critical thresholds. Half a century later, though the system still hasn’t imploded, it has become more and more chaotic in the sense that there is no global coherence or agreement in either values or understanding. The demands for social and ecological justice now crash against the “soft resistance” of this ethical and cognitive chaos. Our militancy and resistance are both visible and invisible. The feeling of helplessness has worsened.

We now need a pact between the great secular narratives and the new narratives, one that remembers and is open

3 Ibidem. (La science et la technique s’attacheraient à outiller le psychisme de l’homme. De la naissance à la mort, l’humanité serait confinée dans l’école permanente étendue à l’échelle du monde, traitée à vie dans le grand hôpital planétaire et reliée nuit et jour à d’implacables chaînes de communication. Ainsi fonctionnerait le monde de la Grande Organisation.)

4 Ibidem. (Pourtant les échecs antérieurs des thérapies de masse laissent espérer aussi la faillite de cet ultime projet de contrôle planétaire.)

to the many layers of reality and to the complexity of man. The *a priori* of the human phenomenon and its ethical horizon which we have forgotten was well described by Pico della Mirandola. In his *Oratio de hominis dignitate* (1486), Pico imagined Man as God created him—a being who can make himself what he wants to be. Man conceived as self-made, implies man who can fashion himself in the manner of his choosing, free to degenerate into a brute or to rise towards angelic virtues. Modern psycho-anthropological research has confirmed the existence of a human *gestalt* in the form of individual self-awareness and self-fashioning. However, the freedom for such self-fashioning that allows us to recreate or destroy ourselves cannot exceed certain limits. The practice of virtue blossoms only *between limit and freedom*. The art of good living does not claim unconditional freedom but practices a grateful and harmonious interaction with natural laws and the mystery of man and the world. Everything that pre-exists us has its laws (intrinsic forms of Being) and transcends us in the mystery of genesis. The cosmos, the great pre-human work, is the *sacrum* that can dampen our feeling of creative omnipotence. The very existence of man, renewed by every act of procreation, is not only due to man. We can therefore interact harmoniously with the “open work” that we are, within the limits of our body, with the depth and the many voices of our psyche, urging body and psyche into active processes of transformation and integration. We can interact harmoniously with the other great “open work” to which we belong, the work of the world, which binds every man to other men, and binds all men to nature. It is an integral interaction: both scientific and technological as it is philosophical, artistic, aesthetic, and mystical.

In this *balanced ethical anthropocentrism*, the centrality of the Human is not a question of omnipotence but a question of perspective: we look at the world from our point

of view and the world is arranged, inevitably, around us as the center. Preserving this ability to “be the center” is our first requirement. To be the center means to become a self-aware mirror of the great pre-human frame, the reality of the *sacrum*. To be the center also means to be able to modify the frame and to imagine a meaning that balances pre-existing laws, freedom, and mystery.

Every man is this center and individual separateness is the foundation of our condition. However, his separateness can only survive through relationships between humans. We owe our lives to those who gave birth to us and to those who are our custodians in our last days. We owe the materials of personal self-shaping to shared stories and plural experiences. The “we” who pre-exist is given, more or less restricted, localized. But unprecedented partnerships of individuals generate a new “we”, beyond the “hereditary.” We have the individual faculty of belonging freely, up to universal belonging. The universalistic approach of ethics—the existence of Each in the existence of the Whole—is enabled and made necessary by the worldwide connection of our times.

The “common good” that is our Humanity brings us together in the difference of our identities. The horizon of maximum inclusion, the planetary horizon, safeguards the right to diversity and equal dignity for all humans. The particular is thereby saved in the universal. And the universal acquires truth in the concrete ethics of every encounter between persons. The failure to recognize this “pluriversalism” is the history of fratricidal extermination that we carry from the past to the present: the history of injustice, prejudice, discrimination, and oppression.

Descending

The affirmation of this “common good” of the Human is necessary in the face of the historical *novum*: the mass ex-

termination of the species by weapons of mass destruction or some scientific or technological dystopia which threaten to erase human virtue and freedom itself. Such dystopias are the result of the systemic chaos we inhabit—they are the climax to drift in values and knowledge. For instance, according to current cognitive neuroscience, the problem of free self-determination can only be comprehended in a scientific context. If one accepts the conclusions of such a “neurobiology of the will”, then the freedom of human decisions is an illusion and a myth which helps us accept life. Decisions are nothing more than the products of the brain’s electrochemical machinery. Similarly, the grotesque transhumanist paradox—product of emerging and converging technologies (NBIC: Nanotechnology, Biotechnology, Information technology, Cognitive science)—promises the absolute freedom from biology by transforming man into a machine. But this transhumanist leap was already prepared for by the grotesque perversion of universalism in the form of economic and technocratic globalization. In fact, in the name of freedom, the scope for freedom and virtue is already diminished by the increasing dependence on digital technologies and the expanding use of social robots.

In *La Convivialité*, Illich had identified the over-equipped, dependent, and compliant man as a man disabled from the practice of virtue. Today, this kind of being is the accepted model of man, both offline and online. The new interactive and reticular structure of the Internet establishes the radical hyper-monopoly that mediates every aspect of life. It is the apotheosis of services, the “planetary service”, the realm of global advertising. All is provided through the Internet: medical treatments, education, information, entertainment, sex, politics, gymnastics, commerce, friendship, spirituality and even self-discovery through self-branding. We know that the network experience is not neutral: shapeless, promis-

cuous, and unlimited, it reproduces and amplifies systemic chaos and threatening, above all, the reality principle. The Internet appears to offer a space for each to be heard only to be dominated by the incessant babble of disincarnated voices. The invitation to create on the Internet actually captures human creativity in the pop system of the market conditioned by “likes” and trending topics. Frustration, disorientation, and malaise are treated with more or less expensive palliatives, including massive doses of “influencers”, which increase the total amount of manipulation and acquiescence. Equally, the seeming refuge of the “echo chamber” where tensions are relieved in aggressive polarizations do not destabilize the whole but rather strengthen it. For the supposedly lucky ones, the virtual cyberspace of the Metaverse is offered as real refuge. The vicious circle is thereby evident: the apparatus of chaos attacks the very lucidity, sensitivity, and realism that are necessary to contest it.

Beyond our induced disabilities and our systemic masks, virtue can resist only to the extent it can. “The larger human matrix that supports each individual human life”⁵ remains a latent force that is more or less inhibited. In the absence of personal discernment, systemic chaos favors the worst “contents”, and the worst psychic and mechanical automatisms. Our perceptions are mediated by helpful apps with which we gain control over various digital tools like smart assistants and home security devices that, in turn, control us. Sympathetic GPT chatbots, which we insist on calling “artificial intelligences”, take over our most delicate and creative tasks including composing works of art and literature. Social robots care for the most vulnerable, offer psychological assistance, and companionship.

5 I. Illich (1976) *Limits to medicine – Medical Nemesis: the expropriation of health*, (London: Marion Boyars, 1976), p. 153.

The outcome of this tendency could be suicide. Disabled and disoriented man, plunged by the techno-system into the chaos of himself and the world, can only find refuge in his post-human opposite, the cyborg, the perfectly programmed device. The question “what does it mean to be man” in the presence of an invasive impact with the realm of “things” had never been asked before; nor have we ever seen such virtual and complex “things”. The new tools could bypass our conscious experience, short-circuit the exercise of virtue and freedom, thereby dramatically reducing the distance between man and thing. The technically enhanced superman could include a device to directly download information, a remote-controlled pacemaker for mood optimization, or a mechanism for erasing memories with laser techniques. The Human Brain Project—creating an “atlas” of the entire human brain—was completed by 2023. The final aim is to fabricate a completely disembodied human mind, reduced to processes that can be objectified and transferred to the mechanical nature of inanimate matter. “Certain post-humans could even decide to get rid of their bodies and live inside supercomputers, taking the form of pure information.”⁶ After genetic manipulation, cloning, sperm banks and surrogate wombs, with Mind Uploading we will finally be able to die in a digital tomb. The latest invention in the artistic field is post-human music: the neuronal cells of a deceased composer were grown in vitro to create notes using a machine that decodes their impulses.

The technically enhanced superman, competing with the “super-intelligence” of machines, treats himself as one of his own automatons, and treats his own automatons as himself. Hiroshi Ishiguro, the great creator of androids, has produced an android copy of himself. He has named it *Geminoid H1-1*, after the Latin *Geminus* for twin. His goal is

6 Transumanisti.it ; Faq WTA 1999.

to create an android that can convey the feeling of being in the presence of a human being – what the Japanese call “sonzaikan.” According to him, people who know him have felt his presence when they interacted with Geminoid H1-1. To protect such “electronic personalities”, the bioethicist George Dvorsky has dedicated a specific bill of rights, a new *habeas corpus*: the right of machines not to be suppressed, not to have their software modified against their will (!), the right to privacy of their mental states (!) and the right to replicate themselves. Robots will thereby be considered a new species, welcomed by their makers into the *pantheon* of living and sentient creatures.

Those who defend robots, usual accuse the doubters of being narrowly anthropocentric. These skeptics are charged with first having discriminated against animals and plants and now discriminating against our android little brothers. Contrarily, man’s most anthropocentric act is precisely that of not recognizing any *sacrum*, to the point of wanting to overturn the categories of Being and manipulate the processes of genesis. Robots and cyborgs invite us to abandon every old “humanistic” certainty, which is now described as a prejudice or mental inflexibility. At the heart of this defense lurks a sort of “umanfluid” prototype, a mutant prototype of which the “antiquated” spirit/flesh human couple is merely type. In defending cyborgs or post-humans, transhumanists are improperly using the ideological paraphernalia of pluralism. In fact, the pluralistic defense of “differences” applies strictly within the bio-psychic field, which the cyborg difference seeks to escape.

The cybernetic mutation of one’s being is claimed as a new individual right, under the heading “technological rights”. A historic declaration by the *Italian Transhumanists Association* cited “the golden rule of liberal democracies: every man is free to do everything that does not limit the

freedom of others. Becoming a cyborg is a decisive progress in the evolution of the species, the result of rationality and not of chance.⁷ What escapes this “rationality” is the existence of a *common heritage of humanity* which cannot be violated beyond a certain threshold, even in a single individual of the species, without calling into question everyone’s way of being (my life is mine, but my “humanity” belongs to everyone).

A basic ethical choice is at stake here: the choice between the *ethics of metamorphosis* (transformation in continuity) or the *ethics of mutation* (transformation in discontinuity). The choice is between the evolution of *man* and the evolution *from man*. Thanks to his capacity for self-determination, man can decide to technologically break down his own limits and at the same time his own freedom, in exchange for liberation from malaise, fatigue, and wickedness. The aim is to break the autopoietic autonomy of the human *gestalt* and replace the virtuous arts of the soul with the certainty of cybernetic manipulations. As Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor reminded Jesus⁸, men fear freedom from the fear of losing control. At the basis of every ethic of mutation, of every Promethean excess of technical power, there is weakness, emptiness, and impotence in the face of the experience of evil. In other words, the desire for complete control is prompted by the lack of arts, philosophies, rituals, community and love... in a word, suitable virtues. Perhaps it is the very effort required for virtue that frightens. Perhaps we don’t know the virtue that liberates but only the one that represses. We do not know the virtue that enlivens but only that which mortifies.

7 Transumanisti.it; Sarò Cyborg, “La Repubblica” 26 febbraio 2005.

8 F. Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazof*.

Renewing

We can respond to this oncoming descent of man into machine with the resources of what we will call the *culture of proportion*. The culture of proportion knows how much joy (and not just how much harm) can come from our faculty of self-shaping, when this is conducted in a proportionate way: a harmonious taste, a fluid, imponderable wisdom, completely embodied and personal. This wisdom—guarantor of our own freedom—demands our joyful asceticism and rewards us with the joy of the proportion between flesh and spirit, between nature, culture and technology, between person and person, between individual and community, between knowledge and mystery. The culture of proportion practices a “critical acceptance” of human limits and a corresponding implementation of technologies, shaped in the broader and indispensable context of our virtues.

We are accordingly taken back to *La Convivialité*. That text was a radical examination aimed at identifying the counter-productivities of technologies that exceeded certain natural scales, and the related psychologically critical tolerance thresholds.

The thresholds beyond which destruction looms do not determine the range of degrees to which a society voluntarily limits the use of its tools. The thresholds outline the field of possible survival, the limits of the range represent the closure of a culture [...] The need to determine thresholds and not to cross the limits thus defined is the same for all societies.⁹

9 I. Illich, *La Convivialité*, cit. p. 544. (Les seuils au-delà desquels se profile la destruction ne déterminent pas la fourchette des degrés auxquels une société limite volontairement l'usage de ses outils. Les seuils dessinent le champ de la survie possible, les limites de la fourchette figurent la clôture d'une culture [...] La nécessité de déterminer des seuils et de ne pas franchir les bornes ainsi définies est la même pour toutes les sociétés.)

In the new draft of the text for the French edition, following the English one, Illich inserted a clarification we need to reflect on:

These natural scales are capable of identification, without claiming to be able to say something about the nature of man or society. These scales define in negative and proscription terms the space within which the human phenomenon can be observed. But they do not contribute in any way to saying what nature this phenomenon is, any more than they formulate any prescription.¹⁰

However, it is certain that Illich provides us with an anthropological characterization in terms of creativity, virtue, and self-shaping—a truly universal characterization, unlike the fictitious universalism of many cultural “colonizations”. Each threshold denounces the technological excess detrimental to essential human values. The human balance will be able to be reestablished, according to Illich of the 1970s through a reappropriation on multiple fronts: reappropriation of the environment, of autonomous and self-destined initiative, of metabolic energy, of knowledge, of the power to influence Law, of historical dialectics, and community solidarity.

Decades after *La Convivialité*, and after having acutely theorized “the age of system”, Illich invited us to transform our powerlessness into our new wealth. Reconnecting with oneself is the best way to sabotage the system. The tracing of natural scales is replaced by personal attention to proportion. The normative variety of traditional cultures, the many lifestyles of the vernacular corners, largely belong to the past. What can be reborn is an individual and shared variety, ac-

10 Ibidem. (Ces échelles naturelles sont susceptibles d'identification, sans qu'on prétende pouvoir dire quelque chose de la nature de l'homme ou de la société. Ces échelles définissent en termes négatifs et de proscription l'espace à l'intérieur duquel le phénomène humain peut être observé. Mais elles ne contribuent en rien à dire de quelle nature est-ce phénomène, pas plus qu'elles ne formulent de prescription.)

according to the values of a radical anthropology, witnessed face to face in the daily commitment of life. In the ethical tension between particular and universal, we can thus honor our belonging to that human condition which is both our mother and our daughter.¹¹

11 I thank Samar Farage for her friendly and precious editing.