

Corruptio optimi quae est pessima:
the relevance of Illich
in a time of exacerbating civilizational crisis
by Carlos Tornel*

On October 19 and 20, 2023, a group of friends¹ gathered at the Cristobal Colon University in the city of Veracruz, México, to discuss the work of Iván Illich and the continuing relevance of his thought. *Is Illich's diagnosis of industrial society still valid? Are the tools he proposed still useful? and what would he say today in the face of a deepening civilizational crisis?* Very much in the spirit of Illich's *science by people*—a mode of inquiry that moves outside the interests of the market and works towards creating convivial possibilities among people, we convened around a table, sharing ideas, food, and drink. We revisited Illich's work as a source of critical thinking to address such pressing issues as climate change, green capitalism, and the post-COVID-19 world shaped by a generalized state of exception from democratic decision-making. We became convinced that Illich's critique of modern institutions remains pertinent for an age marked by ever-growing scarcity and alienation. Exploring the possibility of reclaiming conviviality given contemporary capitalism is crucial to constructing a *pluriverse*—a world where diverse realities can coexist—as the Zapatistas argue. This article explores Illich's critique of modernity, institutionalization, and the concept of scarcity. It discusses how contemporary institutions perpetu-

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ate a false sense of universality, deepening radical monopolies and managerial control. The article reflects on Illich's belief that a digital society threatens the vernacular and concludes by calling for conviviality and interculturality as the basis of a radical pluralism or a pluriverse.

An apophatic theologian. The corruption of Christianity and its significance for modern institutions.

Giorgio Agamben has shown that Illich was always and above all a Christian thinker by connecting his young years as a priest to his critiques of modernity. In his conversations with David Cayley, Illich confirms that modern institutions are descendants of the Catholic church:

the Incarnation makes possible a surprising and entirely new flowering of love and knowledge (...) The opening of this new horizon is also accompanied by a second danger: institutionalization. There is a temptation to try to manage and, eventually, to legislate this new love, to create an institution that will guarantee it, insure it, and protect it by criminalizing its opposite.²

Illich argues that it is in the matter of incarnation-crucifixion—events that hold both a historical and theological meaning—that the radical implications of the message of Jesus become clear. These events changed the world in a profound sense: for the first time, they placed the relation to others and love over the *ethnos*—communal traditions, laws, and customs—inaugurating an unprecedented way of shaping relationships with *the other*.

This is perhaps best explained in the parable of the Good Samaritan. In the Gospels, Jesus responds to a question posed by one of the apostles: 'God says that one should love

2 Cayley, D. (2019). *Rivers North of the Future*, Anansi Press. 112-113.

God and one's neighbor as oneself but, *who is my neighbor?*' The parable is used to demonstrate that one's neighbor could be anyone, regardless of their beliefs, their ethnicity, or their customs. The Samaritan of the parable breaks all the pre-established rules of tradition, and he walks into what Cayley says is uncharted territory: a new vision of *ethnos* that reflects only grace, that is, the possibility of relating to others as if they were part of one's reality.³ The Church, however, as an institution, begs the question by transforming it into '*how we should act towards our neighbors?*' Thus, modernity—through the institutions that followed the foundations laid down by the Church—is the result of misinterpreting the question posed in the parable of the Good Samaritan. By teaching it as a doctrine, the parable is interpreted as a call to service instead of a radical questioning of social structures policed by ethnic boundaries. As Illich argues,

The incarnation is not merely a ritual act which generates a myth (...) Just as God became flesh and, in the flesh, relates to each one of us, so you are capable of relation in the flesh. (...) Take away the fleshy, bodily, carnal, dense, humoral experience of the self, and therefore of the Thou, from the story of the Samaritan and you have a nice liberal fantasy, which is something horrible. You have the basis on which one might feel responsible for bombing the neighbor for his own good.⁴

The liberal fantasy Illich is talking about refers precisely to the temptation to institutionalize the parable. For Illich, this interpretation radically eliminates the freedom of choosing in Christianity, that is, to see *the other* as a neighbor.

If the freedom to choose one's neighbor is trans-

3 Cayley, D. (2021). *Ivan Illich. An intellectual Journey*. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press.

4 Quoted in Cayley (2021), p: 226.

formed into an institutionalized obligation, whether as charity or development aid, it then perpetuates a vicious circle where the failures of the doctrine to care reinforce the illusion of the need for it.⁵ The effort to institutionalize the gospel produces what Illich calls ‘disabling professions’ which, by creating the social category of needy people, generate dependent clients instead of free citizens. This dependency—explored further in the following section—entails a radical collapse of autonomous subsistence into the alienated consumption of professional services. Hence, modernity is not the antithesis of Christianity, but its *corruption*. The modern world of needs met by the radical monopoly of professionally delivered services is rooted in the effort to institutionalize and enforce the radical message of the gospel. In this way, lived experience is decentered in favor of producing disciplined and indifferent subjects.⁶

Reading Illich as an apophatic theologian clarifies our present moment. First, it reveals that when the Samaritan’s felt charity and hospitality are transformed into a duty, a policy, or a law, then any failure to meet this obligation becomes a punishable offense. Such a dynamic generates the ‘need’ for training by experts to guarantee that people obey the law. The rise of the “risk society” as discussed by Ulrich Beck can be understood as a late modern derangement of the effort to program a caring society.⁷ Illich invoked ‘Nemesis’, the Greek goddess that personified retribution, to show the result of the process of institutionalization and over-programming which necessitate experts to manage the *inevitable* risks (or nemesis), that accompany modernity. The consciousness of risk

5 Esteva, G. (2020). Defender la autonomía de la democracia. *Utopía y Praxis Latinoamericana*, 25 (91): 253-265.

6 Taylor, C. (2019). ‘Prólogo a la edición Canadiense’. In, Illich, I. *Los Ríos al norte del futuro. Conversaciones con David Cayley*. (pp:19-29). México: Alios Ventos.

7 Beck, U. (1992). *Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage.

entails a form of ‘disembedding,’ that is, a process of dislocating enfolded persons and placing them under a mathematical abstract management. For example, people are not given a diagnosis grounded in the experience of the patient but are handed a probability of illness based on population statistics.⁸

The corruption of Christianity—exemplified by the progressive management of risk—signals a turn to what Illich refers to as the ‘age of systems.’ Famously, Illich argued that his intent was less to think about what tools ‘do’ and more to unveil what they ‘say.’ In their effort to keep life safe and immune to all dangers, modern institutions organize it into managed abstractions. Preserving life at any cost folds it into the system as a feedback loop. This is what Illich calls, the ‘ritualization of crisis’ in which the paradoxical solution to any social ill can only be righted by a reform of the system itself.⁹ By eliminating any outside of the system, the subject-object relationship collapses. Whereas tools reflect the user’s will, the system incorporates the user into itself, it becomes a self-regulating totality, from which there seems to be no alternative, no possibility of imagining something that exists outside of it. Illich would even argue that, in this state, people no longer see themselves as beings, but as subsystems that are only ‘legible’ under a system that already exists.

In *Shadow Work*, Illich argued that the vernacular refers to that which remains outside economic ideology and market exchange, which are founded on the notion of scarcity.¹⁰ Scarcity is the foundational myth of economics and thus, a key concept to dismantle to tackle the ongoing civilizational crisis. This concept is how the development enterprise gives it-

8 Illich, I. (2006). *Obras Reunidas, Volumen 1*. Ciudad de México: Fondo de Cultura Económica.

9 Illich, I. (2008). *Obras Reunidas, Volumen 2*. Ciudad de México: Fondo de Cultura Económica.

10 Illich, Ivan (1981). *Shadow work*. London: Marion Boyars.

self legitimacy. This appears counterintuitive at first glance, as scarcity seems to be a common condition of our present and thus, it has enormous convincing power: scarcity appears always on the horizon, reminding us of the importance and relevance of institutions that promise to free us from it.¹¹ However, institutions produce precisely what they promise to erase: the ‘need’ for education never ends, health becomes a constant risk-management enterprise, and communication an unrelenting necessity. Hence it is not a matter of solving that which is made scarce through institutions, but to challenge the notion of scarcity as the foundational myth of our relationship with each other and nature. It is not a matter of alternative forms of economics, education, religions, or health systems, but alternatives to these institutionalized systems.

Disabling professions and the rise of a green economy.

Illich proposed that modern institutions—under the universal regime of scarcity—transform as they reach certain thresholds or watersheds. The first of these is the moment in which the purpose of the institution is realized: in medicine, treatments are demonstrably effective; in terms of transportation, it is when motorized vehicles expand mobility and increase the distances traveled; in education, it creates and expands the possibility of learning. The second watershed refers to a threshold beyond which, institutions begin to produce more ills than they solve. In other words, they become counterproductive.

Counter-productivity, Illich argues, is the result of a paradoxical characteristic in which ‘the industrial staple, be it a hospital or a highway system, begins to get in the way and defeat its declared purpose.’¹² Here, tools no longer meet

11 The most prominent of these narratives is that of planetary boundaries. See <https://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/planetary-boundaries.html>

12 Cayley, D. (2022). *Ivan Illich. An Intellectual Journey*. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania

the needs of people but become ends in themselves. After this watershed, means become ends, verbs –which entail direct action and human agency– become nouns, independent use mutates to dependent consumption, and objectives become abstractions such as when health is measured by the number of treatments. This counter-productivity results in a paradoxical increase of inequality, a key point Illich makes in *Energy and Equity*: beyond the second watershed, equality and increased throughput production are mutually exclusive.¹³ Javier Sicilia nicely sums up the argument of how counter-productivity can be recognized in modern institutions:

The church administers life and souls by criminalizing and depriving them of Christ; schools (...) stupefy and paralyze free learning experiences through pyramidal structures that frustrate and exclude; energy inhibits the freedom of our feet and their relationship with the ground and the environment, it instead makes us dependent on ever-increasing absurdities and costly means of transportation; medicine threatens the integrity of patients making them dependent on institutions and professionals, frustrating their capacity to suffer, to heal themselves and to die. The economy, which disembodied society from the social fabric, is defined through scarcity invading all environments and destroying gender and the proportional relations that constitute subsistence (...) the planning of life ends up transforming human beings into managed subjects from conception to death (*my translation*).¹⁴

By taking away the means of subsistence, institutions de-

State University Press, p.126.

13 Illich, I. (2006). *Obras Reunidas, Volumen 1*. Ciudad de México: Fondo de Cultura Económica.

14 Sicilia, J. (2008) 'Prefacio.' En *Iván Illich, Obras reunidas II*. (pp: 13-38) Fondo de Cultura Económica. México.

prive people not only of the means of production—as Marx thought through the concept of *primitive accumulation*—but of their cultural capacities to meet their needs on their own terms. After the second watershed is crossed, the replacement of tools by systems inaugurates an era called a *radical monopoly*, which refers to the encompassing power that institutions create over people and their needs. Once the means of subsistence have been replaced by an absolute dependence on services provided by institutions, all alternatives to these services have been rendered either inaccessible, unimaginable or even unfathomable. Radical monopoly is understood as the creation of a totality or a system in which no *outside* becomes practicable, conceivable, or even possible. Here the innate or cultural-specific abilities that people possess to subsist are made redundant or are even ruled out. These means of subsistence are replaced by needs that are imputed by the very experts who then efficiently control the resources necessary to satisfy them.

A good example of this circular reasoning is the increasing array of non-polluting technologies. The notion of greenness in contemporary society has inaugurated what Ana Isla calls the highest stage of extractivism,¹⁵ a continuation of the old political economy now justified under a benevolent concern for the climate and the environment.¹⁶ The notion of greenness thus entails the latest stage in a long history of alienation of the *other* as a *barbarian*, a *pagan*, an *infidel*, a *native*, or the *underdeveloped*, which, justified under the West's missionary efforts, has created a one-world world that excludes all other vernacular ways of knowing, being, and doing

15 Isla, A. (2021). "Greening," the highest stage of extractivism in Latin America. In Brownhill, L., Engel-Di Mauro, S., Giacomini, T., Isla, A., Löwy, M. & Turner, T. (Eds.) *The Routledge handbook on ecosocialism*. (pp. 67-80). Routledge.

16 Dunlap, A. (2024). *The System is Killing us. Land Grabbing, the green economy and ecological conflict*. London: Pluto Press.

in the world.¹⁷

When Illich wrote *Tools for Conviviality*, he still thought that at least two-thirds of the global population could choose not to follow the same path of industrialization and development that the Global North had taken. In other words, the notion that another modernity was possible was still at hand.¹⁸ However, already in *Shadow Work* he saw that the vernacular was succumbing faster than previously thought into the realm of scarcity—be it as shadow work or forms of ‘disvalue’ necessary for the continued functioning of economic-capitalist-ideology.¹⁹ The process of disembedding—the separation and progressive subsumption of the social into the economic realm—despite the absolute socioecological catastrophe that it would entail, was becoming complete.²⁰

The green economy, or the notion of greenness is then the latest and perhaps most pernicious manifestation of a closed and completely managed system. It assumes the possibility of total control through a complete rejection of the vernacular domain that ultimately leads to a form of artificiality, or a system built on its own image.²¹ The emergence of alternatives under this managed totality is a false solution that ends up being more of the same because they are alternative forms of education, economies, health, etc. instead of alternatives *to* them. The result usually becomes an abstraction that eliminates the distance between the being and the system: all

17 Cayley, D. (2022). *Ivan Illich. An intellectual Journey*. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press.

18 Beck, H. (2014). *Otra modernidad es posible. El pensamiento de Iván Illich*. México: Malpaso.

19 Illich, I (1981). *Shadow work*. London: Marion Boyars.

20 Polanyi, K. (2001). *The great transformation. The political and economic origins of our time*. Boston: Beacon Books.

21 González Gómez, E. (2022). *Religarnos. Más allá del monopolio de la Religión*. Barcelona: Kairós. The author uses the concept of ‘artificialeza’ in Spanish. For a detailed version in English, please see Tornel and González, this issue of *Conspiratio*.

needs, rights, and laws can only be provided by this system. The green economy exemplifies the notion of *Geopower* understood as the moment when the earth itself becomes the object of knowledge and management.

After the age of scarcity, the globalization of hope.

In 1988, Ivan Illich and a group of friends gathered at Pennsylvania State University to discuss, *after development, what?* During these conversations, Illich asked Gustavo Esteva—a close friend and collaborator—how he would describe the era *after* development, Gustavo recalls that he immediately answered: *Hospitality*.²² Esteva's adoption of the concept of hospitality is based on a broader project of *radical plurality* that argues for a reading of Illich that goes beyond theology. For him, Illich's entire project is anchored on his attempt to break with 'the monocultural barrier.' For Esteva, the way Illich embodied this metaphor of the Good Samaritan was to place the intercultural question at the center of his life and work. Esteva argues that Illich chose not to become a scholar or a theologian, but to place himself at the service of 'embodied action.'

This choice sits in line with what Esteva²³ –following Raimon Panikkar²⁴– would refer to as *radical pluralism*: the possibility of recognizing that, while cultures are incommensurable, there is a possibility of establishing a dialogue between *logos* and *techne*, that is between the cosmological matrixes that constitute each culture and embodied practice,

22 Esteva, G. (2019c). *Post-script*. In *Los ríos al norte del futuro*. Illich, I. Conversaciones con David Cayley. (pp: 71-85). Querétaro: Alios Ventos.

23 Esteva, G. (2019a). "El camino hacia el diálogo de vivires" In Sartorello, S. *Diálogos y conflictos inter epistémicos en la construcción de una casa común*. (pp.133-168). Ciudad de México: Universidad Iberoamericana.

24 Panikkar, R. (1990). *Sobre el diálogo intercultural*. Salamanca: Editorial San Esteban.

action. For Esteva, Illich made a conscious choice of dedicating his life to *intercultural dialogue* as the essence of a convivial society. In other words, Illich chose not to speak as a theologian or a scholar, but to embody such a practice, first in Puerto Rico and later in Mexico, Latin America, and the Global South.²⁵ This intercultural project translates to a defense, a reconstitution of the creation of vernacular domain: that which remains outside the economic ideology and that would now fit into what the Zapatistas call a pluriverse—a world where many *worlds* fit—constituted through multiple autonomous movements that seek to challenge the disabling power of institutions and professions. This commitment was based on the possibility of people becoming aware of otherness, and to exist without trying to convince, indoctrinate, and help the other. Esteva argues that the key to Illich's *corruptio optimi quae est pessima* is not a matter of faith, church, or theology, but a recovery of the Samaritan's hospitality as an embodied practice, a rupture of a monocultural barrier, and a form of ethics that would shape the era of post-development.

Esteva's closeness to Illich's work is rooted in his attempt to describe what he, following the Zapatista movement, called *the end of an era*.²⁶ As the Zapatistas declared, we are in the midst of a fourth world war, a war that is no longer fought on a battlefield, but that is wedged into our everyday lives.²⁷ For Esteva, this violent turn in capitalism is the result of the system not being able to reproduce itself under its own terms. What characterizes it is a descent into barbarism. While the rituals persist—such as liberal democracy and the

25 Esteva, G. (2022). *Gustavo Esteva. A critique of development and other essays*. London: Routledge. P:96.

26 Esteva, G. (2021). *Hacia una nueva era*. Colección Al Faro Zapatista. Buenos Aires, Argentina: Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales.

27 EZLN (2015). *Pensamiento crítico frente a la Hidra Capitalista I. Participación de la Comisión Sexta del EZLN*. México: EZLN.

welfare state—Esteva argues, 'they quickly become fetishisms that conform to the dominant superstitions'.²⁸ Under such a system, the traditional tools and recipes for social change that we depended on are no longer useful—we can no longer rely on strikes, demonstrations, and/or boycotts. The present condition is of a capitalism that has no use for living labor, but one that is increasingly dependent on the state's monopoly on violence, policing, and the use of military and other disciplinary forces, as well as other methods for shaping subjectivities such as credit and debt.²⁹

Esteva's response is a shift in scale—through the rejection of the traditional monopoly of politics by the state—and of approach, which entails a rejection of social hierarchies and the reformulation of politics with care for life at the center. Esteva calls this an 'ongoing insurrection', a response from the daily life of thousands if not millions of common people rejecting the pre-established forms of counter-productivity, radical monopolies, and the totality of systems.³⁰ For Esteva, the shattering of the myth of progress and the increasing evidence of the colonial-capitalist and patriarchal enterprises of the last 500 years, especially in Latin America, has enabled a revolution of consciousness, one that is best embedded in the Zapatista uprising. The significance of the Zapatista rebellion to recuperate the commons, autonomy, and dignity sits in line with Illich's thought and offers some hope and examples that Illich would refer to as a recovery of the vernacular.

Illich's intercultural commitment focused then on the possibility of reclaiming tools and refusing the industrial

28 Esteva, G. (2019b). 'Repensar el carácter del régimen dominante'. In, Ornelas, R. & Inclán, D. (Ed.) *Cuál es el futuro del capitalismo*. México: Akal. P:69.

29 For a detailed discussion see Jappe, A. (2015). *The Writing on the Wall: On the Decomposition of Capitalism and Its Critics*. London: Zero Books.

30 Esteva, G. (2013). 'La Insurrección en Curso'. In, Ornelas, R. (Ed.) *Crisis Civilizatoria y superación del capitalismo*. México: UNAM.

option. However, this opportunity, which was still present in the early seventies, progressively began to fade as the second threshold became almost universalized under the discourse of development. The reformulation of needs and the disabling professions had stymied the possibility of people retaining their autonomy and self-sufficiency, where alienation becomes not only material but epistemic and ontological, creating the conditions of modernized poverty. However, the recovery of the vernacular domain entails a recovery of tools and the recognition of a common roof, but even more, it entails a new form of asceticism based on a personal commitment to foolish renunciation.³¹ As Jean Robert argues, the selective forms of renunciation are based on two words Illich used to describe the role of the person in the age of systems: *hexis* and *askesis*.³² These terms refer to a disposition or a sense of proportionality and ethics. In his reflection on Leopold Kohr, Illich argues that appropriateness, both in terms of size and measure, constitutes the basis of a social morphology that is fitting to each place.³³ *Hexis* entails a personal renunciation; an attitude of openness that radically challenges the economic imperative and fearlessly explores the reformulation of what is needed. This new asceticism would then be informed by a historical study of ‘how the senses have been disciplined in other societies and how they were disciplined in the West before the “cultural split” that he traces to the twelfth century.’³⁴

Illich calls for the adoption of surprise as a political concept that can shape the way toward a new era. In our cur-

31 Cayley, D. (2021). *Ivan Illich. An intellectual Journey*. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press.

32 Robert, J. (2022). *La edad de los sistemas en el pensamiento del Illich tardío*. Ciudad de Mexico: Ithaca.

33 Illich, I. (1994). The Wisdom of Leopold Kohr. Available at: <https://center-forneweconomics.org/publications/the-wisdom-of-leopold-kohr/>

34 Cayley, D. (2021). *Ivan Illich. An intellectual Journey*. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, p. 303.

rent state of modernity, over-programming, and managerial control requires the precise opposite. Surprise is discouraged, and so are the other worlds, and possible ways of being, knowing, and doing that do not fit the mold of the *World* defined by capitalist modernity. This is what a few scholars have defined as political ontology, a process that enables the possibility of recognizing other ways of knowing, being, and doing in the world that are obscured and denied by a dominant ontology.³⁵

Illich return to the vernacular, to hospitality, and friendship drawing on the radical parable of the Samaritan promises the recognition of othered vernacular domains where challenges to the dominant paradigm of modernity emerge and where radical plurality enables the possibility of a dialogue within and with modernity.³⁶

In place of a conclusion: openings

These words were written in the aftermath of the commemoration of the 30th anniversary of the Zapatista uprising. The Zapatista insurrection not only embodies the possibility of surprise and the attitude of the Samaritan that Illich spoke about, but it embodies the act of radical pluralism: the radical possibility of learning how to listen and let oneself be transformed by the other without losing one's essence.³⁷ The Zapatista struggle can be seen as an insurrection rooted in the possibility of reclaiming the vernacular in the forms of communitarian entanglements that place caring, the common, and tools at the center.³⁸ Alongside other movements

35 Blaser, M. & de la Cadena, M. (2018). *A World of Many Worlds*. Durham: Duke University Press.

36 Giraldo, O. F. (2022). *Conflictos entre mundos. Negación de la alteridad, diferencia radical, ontología política*. México: Colegio de la frontera sur.

37 Esteva, G. (2021). *Hacia una nueva era*. Colección Al Faro Zapatista. Buenos Aires, Argentina: Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales.

38 Gutierrez Aguilar, R. (2018). 'Producir lo común Entramados comunitarios y

such as the Rojava resistance in Kurdistan and many other alternatives that are shaping and reformulating an alternative to economics instead of alternative economic systems, the sphere of the vernacular has been recentered as a means to transition towards another era.³⁹ The new internationalism of hope or the ‘globalization of rebellion’ that the Zapatistas have embodied is consistent with how Illich thought one should act in the age of systems and a generalized situation where the second watershed has become almost universal: the possibility of placing friendship, surprise, hope, and hospitality as the basis of a new era after development.

Going back to the three original questions that motivated this paper, it can be argued that not only is Illich’s thought still relevant, but that his diagnosis of the ongoing civilizational crisis remains relevant, though still mostly ignored. The relevance of Illich to the ongoing expansion of extractivism lies not only in the importance of his early concepts such as counter-productivity, radical monopoly, and the age of systems to explain how institutions are incapable of solving our global predicaments—best exemplified by the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing climate collapse—but also why it is futile to place our hopes and efforts on these systems and these scales.

If tools become too powerful, too big, or too efficient, they begin to degrade nature, concentrate power, interrupt tradition, and increase frustration. Somewhat paradoxical for our age, Illich tells us that limits are the only way we can ex-

formas de lo político’. In R. Gutierrez Aguilar (Ed.), *Comunidades, tramas comunitarias y producción de lo común. Debates contemporáneos desde América Latina* (pp. 51–72). Colectivo Editorial Pez en el Árbol; Esteva, G. (2020). Defender la autonomía de la democracia. *Utopía y Praxis Latinoamericana*, 25 (91): 253-265; Escobar, A. (2021). Reframing civilization(s): from critique to transitions. *Globalizations*, 0 (0): 1-22.

39 Dunlap, A. & Tornel, C. (2024). Was postdevelopment too much? Autonomous struggle, academic coloniality & the radical roots of the pluriverse. *Globalizations*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2024.2349317>

perience true freedom. It is within a common roof that we can truly experience the possibility of a *good life*. This is perhaps what we could call a *convivial society*, one where the relationship is based on collectively imposed limits and the ability to rely on the tool. Conviviality sits at the center of most civilizational transition discourses—such as post-development and degrowth—and other philosophies of well-being beyond and alternatives *to* development—such as indigenous notions of Buen Vivir, comunalidad, and Ubuntu.⁴⁰ Furthermore, Illich saw how the loss of gender and the rise of economic sex would lead to capitalist exploitation and the formulation of a *homo oeconomicus*. Re-embedding the economic into the social requires a struggle to reclaim that vernacular from the shadow economy, a way of reclaiming that complementarity—not a return to gendered roles, but a rejection of scarcity as the encompassing myth or the organizing principle of society, as is the case with Western modernity.

In the face of an ongoing civilizational crisis, Illich's work offers a lens to understand its origins: the corruption of Christianity into a total managerial form of control in the form of modern institutions. The result is a form of total alienation that has eroded the vernacular domain. The transgression into a generalized second watershed has created a totality of this system. As Gustavo Esteva argues, without exteriority there can be no new forms of imagination. What remains in a totalized system are the empty rituals and those who believe in these rain dances and take the evidence of rain or the lack of it as a need to continue their dance.⁴¹ The possibilities of a civilizational transition towards other possible worlds are

40 See: Escobar, A. (2015). Degrowth, post-development, and transitions: A preliminary conversation. *Sustainability Science*, 10(3): 451–462; and Kothari, A., Saleh, Escobar, A., Demaria, F. & Acosta, A. (2019). *Pluriverse: A post-development dictionary*. New Delhi: Tulika Books.

41 Esteva, G. (2020). Defender la autonomía de la democracia. *Utopía y Praxis Latinoamericana*, 25, (91): 253-265.

thus impaired by the institutions and tools—such as the State, formal/representative democracy, the use of renewable energies, and green, sustainable, and smart technologies—which end up becoming *alternatives of* and not *to* the counter-productivity of capitalist modernity and its institutions.

In a conversation with a friend, Illich was asked whether his thought constituted some sort of prophecy, to which he responded, “The act of prophecy lies behind us. The only chance now lies in our taking this action as that of the friend. This is the way in which hope for a new society can spread. And the practice of it is not really through words but through little acts of foolish renunciation.”⁴² In an era where, following Agamben, *the future has no future*, where systems have over-programmed reality and managed risk to a frightening extent, and where no *outside* of these systems seems possible,⁴³ Illich calls for a new asceticism—in the form of *hexis* and *askesis*—to create the possibility of an ontological dialogue, a radical possibility of openness (in the form of surprise), where *anyone can be our neighbor*. This attitude, I would argue, is the only way in which an actual radical plurality becomes embodied. That is, it points towards an attitude necessary for a post-development era, one in which a pluriverse is possible.

42 Cayley, D. (2021). *Ivan Illich. An intellectual Journey*. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press. p. 424.

43 Agamben, G. (2015). ‘Se la feroce religione del denaro divora il futuro’. La Repubblica. Available at: <https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2012/02/16/se-la-feroce-religione-del-denaro-divora.html>