

Time To Enclose The Enclosers With Marx and Illich¹

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This essay can be seen as an invitation to use a peculiar window to examine the current conditions of the world and to resist the horror falling on us. It is a window constructed with the juxtaposition of the ideas of Illich and Marx.

Marx in Illich's Thinking

Marxists don't read Illich; Illichians don't read Marx. This is a general rule, which of course has important exceptions. But even the very few who read both thinkers don't see a clear connection between them or they prefer to keep them separated. In juxtaposing here their ideas, I am trying to show that such an operation is very useful in the current conjuncture.

Illich knew very well Marx's critique of political economy and the capitalist mode of production. He acknowledged that Marx's main conclusions were still valid in the second part of the 20th century and fully assumed his socialist ideals. With this and other intellectual and political foundations, Illich constructed his own theoretical and political path. In a sense, he started where Marx ended.

Marx was not a Marxist, as he explicitly wrote. He was not rigidly attached to any dogma. His thinking underwent important transformations during the course of his

¹ This essay is an entirely reformulated version of my intervention in the conference "After the Crisis: The Thought of Ivan Illich Today," Oakland, August 1-3, 2013, and I am using in it edited fragments of other essays, particularly Esteva 2014.

life. Illich followed carefully, with full understanding, the evolution of Marx. He was able to find in the young Marx a source of philosophical inspiration, which gave him the opportunity to obtain a better understanding of the economic writings of Marx.² This is particularly evident when he examines the double alienation produced by capitalism: how the fruits of our work become alien to us, are expropriated from us, and how our creative activity itself also becomes alien to us, ideas first formulated by Marx.

Illich anticipated the direction of Marx's thinking that most of us only discovered in 1982, when Teodor Shanin published *Late Marx and the Russian Road*, a book written as a systematic exploration of what Marx wrote in the last ten years of his life and which had never been published in full. Marx's writings discussed by Shanin are in open contradiction with well-established beliefs of most Marxists and offer a picture of Marx very different from the conventional perception. Some of the main elements of such "discovery" were already known in the West but most Marxists ignored or marginalized them. Not Illich. He knew, for example, the collection of essays by Marx and Engels edited by Blackstock and Hoselitz and published by The Free Press in the US in 1952 and he derived from them the pertinent lessons.³ And Illich knew, of course, *The Civil War in France*, in which Marx adopted a position about the state and the tasks of the proletarian revolution that very few Marxists seem to know, and those who know it, like Lenin, reject or abandon ideas of that book that openly contradict their obsession with seizing power and using the State apparatuses for the revolution (Lenin 1917).

² Teodor Shanin, a well known Marxist and Marxologist, considers that the points of correspondence between Ivan and Marx are very clear, "especially if we consider the early Marx and related arguments". (Personal correspondence).

³ In a conversation with Ivan about the young Marx, in the 1990s, he explicitly alluded to this book, which I knew.

Tools for Conviviality and Marx

In the preface to the Spanish edition of *Tools for Conviviality* (1978), Illich tells the story of how that book was written. In January 1972 a group of Latin Americans gathered at CIDOC to discuss a thesis first formulated in 1971. Successive essays, published in CIDOC (for example *CIDOC Cuaderno* N. 80 and N. 1017) and in different journals (eg. *CoEvolution Quarterly* and *The New York Review of Books*), show Illich's intellectual journey before the book took its final form for an audience of Canadian lawyers. Participants in his seminar in CIDOC between 1971 and 1973, wrote Illich, "will recognize (in the book) their ideas, and often their words."

There were among those Latin Americans some Marxists and young people influenced by Marxian ideas directly or through Liberation Theology, including Paulo Freire and other Latin American thinkers.ⁱ All of them were attracted by the "thesis" of 1971. I don't know if that "thesis," originally formulated in Spanish by Illich and Valentina Borremans, has been published in English. It is not well known, even in Spanish, in spite of the fact that it can be seriously considered the very foundation of Illich's work. The "thesis" circulated in a document called *La Necesidad de un Techo Común (El Control Social de la Tecnología)*, [*The Need of a Common Roof (The Social Control of Technology)*] (2006). Here is a long quote from this text, in my translation:

The social control of systems of production is the basis for any social restructuring: the new phase in which technology already entered allows and demands a new determination of such control.

1) The social ownership of the means of production; 2) The social control of the mechanisms of distribution, and 3) the community agreement on the self-limitation of some technological dimensions, but only as a whole, constitute the basis for the social control of production in a society.

In the first phases of industrialization, the first two aspects seemed so

important that they did not allow enough development of the thinking on the third.

In our opinion, what today is necessary is the political control of the technological characteristics of industrial products and of the intensity of professional services.

This new politics consists in the search for a community agreement on the technological profile of a common roof under which all the members of a society want to live. Rather than the construction of a launching platform, from which only a few members of the society are sent to the stars.

This new politics is a voluntary and communitarian self-limitation, the search of maximum limits in institutional productivity and the consumption of services and commodities, in accordance with the needs considered, within that community, satisfactory for each individual.

The social control of the mode of production gets a wider meaning in the current era of technological development. In the first phases of industrialization, the attention, for good reason, had to concentrate on the ownership of the means of production and on the equitable distribution of products.

In the phase in which we are since the 1960s, the social definition of a maximum, in relation with some basic characteristics of the products of a society, should be the most important political goal.

... We call “technological imperative” the idea that if any technological achievement is possible anywhere in the world, it should be made and put at the service of some men, no matter the price the other members of the society should pay for this.

After criticizing how both capitalist and socialist societies blindly obey the “technological imperative” and prevent the construction of socialism, Illich and Borremans describe how this leads to placing the control of the society in the hands of some technocrats, elected by a political party or a group of capitalists. We consider, observes Illich, “that Kripto-Stalinism is based precisely in this: in winning the social control of the means of production, to justify the central control of the products, at the service of the unlimited growth of production.” The authors continue, “The rejection of the “technological imperative” is the basis to start the search for the technological dimensions to be subjected to the judgment of the people, for the majority to determine under which limits they want to live.”

Illich and Borremans were fully aware that this idea was entirely opposed to the

dominant mentality of their time, in both socialist and capitalist worlds. They considered that in super-capitalist countries “the environmental contamination that makes the Earth unable to sustain human life and the super-determination of the individual that renders him impotent to survive out of an artificial environment, are already creating the consciousness in a small minority of the need to think about the urgency of limiting all production. Finally, they assumed that the leadership for the necessary new politics would come from some countries in Latin America, Africa or Asia.

In August 1972 Illich, with the help of Valentina Borremans, prepared an annotated bibliography based in his personal, often hand-written cards, that he used for his weekly seminar. The idea was “to help the people attending CIDOC, who are studying a common theme, to get acquainted with each other... During the years 1973-1975 several people will have taken the initiative to organize seminars or workshops at CIDOC all dealing with a common theme: “Multiple fundamental and independent limits to industrial growth.” A careful study of the bibliography itself and Illich’s notes about most books and essays included in it may illustrate the direction of his thinking and his connection with Marx’ ideas, through the eyes of heterodox Marxists like David Barkin or Erich Fromm. Time and again, in this text published in *CIDOC Cuaderno N.80* (1973), as in all his work, Illich embraced the socialist ideals formulated by Marx and demonstrated how they cannot be reached without an institutional inversion. The case of David Barkin illustrates the convergence of reflections.

Barkin, a Marxist who knew nothing about Illich or his writings, wrote a critique of the Chilean path to socialism in clear coincidence with the direction of Ivan’s thinking. Ivan invited him to CIDOC and in their conversations he asked him a lot of questions

about Cuba and similar themes. Barkin became a careful reader of Illich. Similarly, Fromm and Illich were friends and Marx was a recurrent theme in their conversations, even in public.

A story told by Teodor Shanin can also be used to illustrate the relationship of Illich and Marx:

More than thirty years ago (1983), on discovering in one of our early conversations that Illich had never seen “the holy land” I invited, and eventually accompanied and hosted him on his visit there. He agreed also to meet my students at Haifa University where I then taught. The University turned out in strengths to see the famous man. I warned him that a group of my brightest students originating in Latin America will challenge him from the orthodox Marxist positions in which they were deeply immersed and knowledgeable. Illich grinned and began his address with Volume 1 of the *Das Kapital*. In the first chapter of this highly important book, he said, Marx singled out two fundamental concepts of “use value” (defined by needs) and “exchange value” (defined by market) and proceeded to develop further the concept of exchange value all the way to the general definition of capitalism. Illich then went on to develop the concept of “use value” towards a parallel ecological and humanist picture of society in which we actually live. It was a total surprise to those in the audience who had read *Das Kapital* for years to understand how much they learnt anew, listening in intense silence. Then, their ovation at the end. To my knowledge Illich himself never went back to the topic or published what he said then. It was just a moment of reflection, a spark and a bit of fun arguing with interesting students in an exotic land (Shanin 2012).

I can also present this argument in personal terms. I met Ivan Illich, for the first time, in 1983. Ivan, internationally renowned and infamous, drawing brilliant intellectuals and activists from all over the world, did not draw us from Mexico’s Marxist Left, in spite of the fact that CIDOC was just 40 miles from where many of us were living. For most of us, he was just a reactionary priest; his fields – education, health, transportation – were irrelevant, mere services we would deal with once we were in power, after eliminating capitalist exploitation. Ivan described well our attitude in 1970. “We are used to considering schools as a variable, dependent on the political and

economic structure. If we can change the style of political leadership, or promote the interest of one class or another, or switch from private to public ownership of the means of production, we assume the school system will change as well.” (Illich 1971, 73)

However, we did not read him then.

In 1983 I was invited to a seminar in Mexico City on the social construction of energy with Wolfgang Sachs. Ivan was there. I was mesmerized. José María Sbert was also there and invited us to his house. It was my first personal interaction with Ivan. That very night, I embarked on my Illich *studium*. A little later, I started to collaborate with him. Still later, slowly, we became friends.

Reading Illich carefully, I could not find any fundamental contradiction with my theoretical and political convictions, for a long time based on my reading of Marx, particularly to understand and transcend the capitalist mode of production. My fascination with Ivan was born out of the fact that his ideas, his words, his writings, were a brilliant and articulated presentation of ordinary people’s discourse. He was describing ways of living and being that I encountered all the time at the grassroots, in my *Zapotec* grandmother’s world; the world of other indigenous peoples; the world of *campesinos* or *marginales*. “Vernacular” and “convivial,” two words that are central to Ivan’s work, were magnificent symbols for my people’s worlds. I heard them there first, not in reading Ivan. All those pre-Illich years, I felt and sensed and smelled and touched and experienced those words and what they symbolized, in the villages, at the grassroots.

Illich’s work held up for me a brilliantly lit torch in the middle of all the intellectual darkness defining the experts’ reality. Illich stood out from the majority of published voices, illuminating for me what I could not make clear sense of before at the

grassroots. His was neither a new theory nor an ideology for them. In my conversation with peasants or marginals, each time I shared Ivan's ideas, they showed no surprise. I began to call their comfortable familiarity with Illich's ideas the "A ha Effect." "A ha!," they said, every time I quoted Ivan. Yes, they knew, better yet, understood by the seat of their pants, what he was articulating. No surprise there. But hearing their own experiences and ideas so well articulated in Ivan's words held up for them a magnificent mirror affirming what they already knew from common sense.

Ivan once said, "People can see what scientists and administrators can't." And he said something more: that the people in our countries, rather than the dissident elite in the advanced ones, were the ones implementing the political inversion he conceived in *Tools for Conviviality*.

In the last words of that book (Ivan commented to David Cayley) I said that I knew in which direction things would happen but not what would bring them to that point. At that time I believed in some big, symbolic event, in something similar to the Wall Street crash. Instead of that, it is hundreds of millions of people just using their brains and trusting their senses. We now live in a world in which most of those things that industry and government do are misused by people for their own purposes. (Cayley 1992, p.117).

People are "just using their brains and trusting their senses." That was exactly my experience. Using Ivan's terminology and concepts – "convivial," "vernacular," "common sense"—I was able to see very clearly what ordinary, common people were thinking and doing ... beyond Marx, with Illich. (See Esteva 2012).

Illich was not a Marxist. Like Marx himself. He was neither a post-Marxist nor a neo-Marxist thinker. He was just a careful reader of Marx. He derived from his reading the pertinent lessons how to see the real nature of capitalism, the forms of alienation it generates, the exploitation defining it, and how to leave behind such evil in order to

embrace socialist ideals. Illich also observed carefully how Marx's ideas were used and abused in the real world—in the name of Marx all kinds of contradictory hypotheses, interpretations and social experiments have been conceived. In my view, he constructed the foundation of his thinking on Marx “territory,” in the same way that he fully used ideas and insights from Everett Reimer, Jacques Ellul, Leopold Kohr, Karl Polanyi, Paul Goodman or the Gospel, whose traces can also be found in the thesis of 1971. In my view, we cannot fully understand Illich's contributions without clear awareness of such foundations.

I don't know why the many connections between Marx and Illich which have been evident for me since the 1980s when I started to read Illich, and that I discussed with him and his Marxist friends like Shanin and Barkin, have been for so long ignored or explicitly denied. They are not necessarily a specific blindness. However, Ivan himself offers a clue to understand this phenomenon. In 1974 Illich took the decision to publish together, in one volume in Spanish, *Energy and Equity* and *Creative Unemployment*, after the criticism he got following *Tools for Conviviality*, because he considered these two essays as the postscript to *Tools*. In the introduction to that edition, he classifies his critics in three categories. The first category included a number of critics disqualifying the book because it did not use “the analytical categories in which they founded their faith.” From those critics, wrote Ivan, he learned to avoid, even more than before, “good, honest and beautiful words...already enslaved, disincarnated and painted by the new inquisitors and those searching for security under their shadow.” He was forced to include among those words “socialism” for all the vices and simplifications embedded in the word—to use it “required great circumspection.” (2006, 42) Both Marxists and anti-Marxists could not

find in Illich the language of their “churches” and apparently could not relate Illich’s radical critique of the idolatrous nature of capitalism and its associated evils with the Marxist jargon (which Illich carefully avoided) or even with Marxian ideas or categories—that Illich used with a lot of care and circumspection. Very few were able to enjoy living elaborations explicitly establishing those connections, like the audience of the Shanin anecdote I mentioned.

Commoning In The New Society

In the mid 1980s Illich invited some of his friends to talk about “After Development, What?” It was the time in which the idea of post-development became fashionable, the years of structural adjustment and “the lost decade for development” in Latin America, the years in which we discovered the nature of the beast. “Development” was a worldwide experiment that in the experience of most people on Earth miserably failed. To share our reflections after three years of conversations, we produced *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power*. For us, “development” was at the center of a powerful but fragile semantic constellation; the time had come to dip into the archeology of the key concepts constituting it and to call attention to its ethnocentric and violent nature. Wolfgang Sachs, the editor of the book, wrote in the introduction: “At a time when development has evidently failed as a socioeconomic endeavor, it has become of paramount importance to liberate ourselves from its dominion over our minds. This book is an invitation to review the developmental model of reality and to recognize that we all wear not merely tinted, but tainted glasses if we take part in the prevailing development discourse.” (Sachs 2010: xix)

In the entry titled, “Development,” my contribution to the book, after an attempt to “unveil the secret of development and see it in all its conceptual starkness,” convinced that “from the unburied corpse of development every kind of pest had started to spread,” I described my experience beyond development with the idea of commoning. My essay ended with an invitation to celebrate and a call for political action. I did celebrate “the appearance of new commons, creatively opened...after the failure of the developers’ strategies to transform traditional people into economic men.” The essay was also a plea “for political controls to protect those new commons and to offer common folks a more favorable social context for their activities and innovations.” (Sachs 2010: 19-20)

Today, “it has become increasingly clear that we are poised between an old world that no longer works and a new one struggling to be born. Surrounded by an archaic order of centralized hierarchies on the one hand and predatory markets on the other, presided over by a state committed to planet-destroying economic growth, people around the world are searching for alternatives.” (Bollier and Helfrich 2012, xii) There is indeed universal consensus that we are at the end of an historical period, but the identification of the corpses—what is it that has ended—is highly controversial. In short hand, for my purpose here, the list of candidates would include: *development, neoliberalism, the American empire, capitalism, economic society* and both *modernity* and *postmodernity*, as well as *5000 years of patriarchy*ⁱⁱ.

It is clear that we cannot accommodate into the conventional notion of commons or community some contemporary novelties, which are currently called “new commons.” We need to make evident the similarities and differences of a thousand different forms of social existence which are beyond the private threshold but are not public spaces, and in

which the free encounter of forms of doing things, speaking them and living them—art (*techné*)—expresses a culture and the opportunity for cultural creation. Such historical and anthropological exploration may enrich our perception of the present, revealing what has been hidden by modernity and discovering the options opened, as urgent challenges, in the time of the death of development.

All this should be explored to seriously assert that commons, at least certain kinds of commons, are already the cell of the new society. As usual, this new society is emerging in the womb of the old one and is often hidden and distorted by the mentality of the latter. One of the most important and urgent challenges we face today is to clean our gaze, in order to be able to clearly identify the novelty of this sociological creation by ordinary folks, who all over the planet are forging the new society through a new kind of revolution, a silent and almost invisible revolution.

The first bourgeois and proletarians died with no awareness of their new social condition. They were unaware of the fact that they had already created a new productive regime. They were trapped in the old mentality. We don't have the same opportunity, we cannot be blind to what is being created, we cannot ignore its very nature. Our full awareness is a condition needed to escape from the current horror. Juxtaposing Marx and Illich can be very useful for that purpose.

The Post-industrial, Convivial Path

There is increasing awareness that the current trends and the prevailing structure of our tools and institutions are a very serious threat to the survival of the human species. As Ivan Illich warned us a long time ago, our institutions have become not only

frustrating and counter-productive, but also destructive of society as a whole. (Illich 1973) Reading today what Illich called his “pamphlets” of the early 1970s, we cannot avoid a feeling of sadness for a path not taken. But we can no longer ignore his warnings.

Winds of change currently cross the Earth. As the Zapatista speaker *subcomandante Marcos* observed, we are in a peculiar historical moment in which to explore the future we are forced to explore the past. For many, such exploration offers a fresh reading of *The Magna Carta* (1215). (Linebaugh 2008) They find in it inspiration to reclaim or regenerate old commons and to resist the new enclosures, policies and actions destroying both nature and society at a planetary scale. Many others are engaged in the celebration of their own non-Western traditions to reinvent their paths. These explorations seem to converge in the “active movements of human commoning and the worldwide demands to share wealth.” (Linebaugh 2008: 280)

Everywhere, millions of people, perhaps billions, are regenerating their own worlds in a new kind of revolution, one whose sense of proportion is in radical contrast to most revolutionary traditions. This revolution is going beyond development and globalization; marginalizing and limiting the economic sphere; reestablishing politics and ethics at the center of social life; reclaiming *comunalidad*ⁱⁱⁱ; assuming new political horizons beyond human rights and the nation-state; adopting radical pluralism; and aiming to create a world in which many worlds can be embraced using representative and participatory democracy as transitional forms towards radical democracy. (Lummis 1996)

In his “Cuernavaca pamphlets,” Illich shared the Rome Club’s concern about demographic and economic growth (Meadows et al. 1972) yet he took the argument further. For him, the expansion of services would produce more damage to culture than

the production of goods to the environment. His radical critique of the school, the health system and transportation (1971, 1974, 1975) illustrated what he called the counterproductivity of all modern institutions. After some threshold, they begin to produce the opposite of what they intend.

Illich formulated a radical critique of the industrial mode of production, capitalist or socialist, and the conditions for the convivial reconstruction of society. Too, he anticipated both the struggle to produce the needed political inversion and peoples' reactions in the time of the crisis – the current time. His ideas are a useful guide to understand what is happening in the world. As governments increasingly operate as mere administrators of private corporations, common people—for reasons of strict survival or in the name of old ideals—are reacting with vigor and imagination. Their initiatives are increasingly wide and radical, and are currently shaping the peaceful uprising resisting the mortal wave of global forces, destroying both nature and culture, while beginning a convivial reconstruction, following pathways very similar to those anticipated by Illich. According to Illich,

the present crisis of our major institutions ought to be welcomed as a crisis of revolutionary liberation because our present institutions abridge basic human freedom for the sake of providing people with more institutional outputs. This worldwide crisis of worldwide institutions can lead to a new consciousness about the nature of tools and to majority action for their control. If tools are not controlled politically, they will be managed in a belated technocratic response to disaster. Freedom and dignity will continue to dissolve into an unprecedented enslavement of man to his tools. (Illich 1973, 12)

And this is the point. Today. Both points. The current enslavement. The current opportunity. Millions of people are reacting in these dual ways.

“The nation-state has become so powerful that it cannot perform its stated functions,” wrote Illich. For him, the corporations and the professions can use the law

and the democratic system to establish their empire. American democracy could survive a victory by Giap, but could not survive the victory of the corporations. The total crisis makes obvious that “the nation-state has grown into the holding corporation for a multiplicity of tools, and the political parties into an instrument to organize stockholders for the occasional election of boards and presidents... They are useless at a moment of a general crash....” When this becomes clear for the people, the opportunity for change emerges. “The same general crisis that could easily lead to one-man rule, expert government, and ideological orthodoxy is also the great opportunity to reconstruct a political process in which all participate.” (Ídem: 109)

For Illich, socialist ideals could not be achieved without an inversion of our institutions and the substitution of convivial for industrial tools...and the retooling of society can only be achieved if socialist ideals are adopted. As an alternative to technocratic disaster, he proposed a convivial society which would be “the result of social arrangements that guarantee for each member the most ample and free access to the tools of the community and limit this freedom only in favor of another member’s equal freedom.” (Ídem: 12)

Forty years after this formulation, this is what seems to be happening. Conviviality, observes Hanns-Albert Steger, “is definitely no longer a futuristic utopia; it has become part of our present.” (Steger 1984) People have started to react to an epochal crisis and to an epistemic rupture. (Esteva 2009) Before governments in panic, given people’s mobilization as well as economic and political structures willing to do anything to keep their position, peoples’ mobilizations are taking the form of an uprising (Esteva 2012a):

- They are still resisting, but also enacting disobedience.
- They are protesting, while also beginning a radical rejection.
- They are challenging daily decisions—all the death, all the people in prison, all the environmental destruction—and at the same time challenging the legitimacy of the system itself, not only its operators. They are refusing to give to it their consent and are no longer willing to accept that representation is the synthesis of social consensus.
- They are increasingly assuming the moral and social obligation of refusing to obey an apparatus basically anonymous while affirming their independence from that apparatus—to stop being slaves of the tool, subsystems of the system^{iv}.
- They are acknowledging the decadence of the consumer society and the welfare state—a monopolistic and organizational capitalism mixed with the state.
- They are rejecting with increasing firmness the dominant democratic despotism, which becomes a mantel to simulate the political, economic, and technical imperialism to which more and more people are today subordinated—the system that transforms every electoral promise into another link of the chain imprisoning everyone.
- They are showing time and again that class domination is first of all domination of people's consciousness and of their confidence in themselves—extended when the idea of change is reduced to a change in leadership.
- And, step by step, they are articulating the terms of a social organization based in personal energy, that is, the energy every person can control; in the freedom regulated by the principles of customary law; in the re-articulation of the old triad:

person, tool and society; and all this supported in three classic pillars: friendship, hope and surprise.

In their autonomous centers for the production of knowledge, as an alternative to the institutional production of “truth,” that is, the statements through which people govern themselves (Foucault, 1980), people are reflecting on a new agenda.

As TINA (“There is no alternative”) became the hegemonic discourse, people are reacting with TATA (“There are a thousand alternatives”). Their democratic struggle, for a long time focused on more participation for those previously excluded, is now taking a different direction.

Many people are still involved in a struggle to improve formal, representative democracy, both to address the well-known vices of the electoral processes and to improve the operation of the government. Other people are struggling to introduce or strengthen participatory democracy, widening the areas of people’s participation in the functions of government, through popular initiatives (for norms and laws), referendum and plebiscite, recall of elected officers, participatory budgeting, transparency, accountability and others. More and more people, however, are trying to place both formal and participatory democracy at the service of radical democracy. (Lummis 1996) “Radical democracy” has been practiced since time immemorial by communities all over the world and is usually associated with autonomy. In a process that implies reorganizing the society from the bottom-up, the idea is to extend such ways of governing to the entire society, under the very basic and logical assumption that democracy should be where the people are, not at the top of the society. Too, many people possess the generalized

awareness that their representatives are not representing them but are increasingly abandoning their responsibilities and their formal commitment to the public interest and the common good.

Ecological awareness, the consciousness of the severity of the environmental destruction, is combined today with political awareness, the consciousness that our dominant political institutions can no longer be trusted. “*¡Basta!* Enough!” said the Zapatistas in 1994. “*¡Que se vayan todos!* All of them should go!” was said ten years later in Argentina. “My dreams don’t fit into your ballot box,” said the *indignados* in Spain in 2011. “We will not leave until they leave!” proclaimed the Greeks that same year. For the first time in 200 years millions of Americans, the people who invented the modern model of democracy, found it dysfunctional—to be at the service of the 1%, not of the 99%, said the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011. All these movements don’t share a new political design or have a ready-made answer for their questions. They are involved in a variety of initiatives, many of which are called forms of localization as an alternative to both globalization and localism. They are rooting and affirming themselves more than ever in their own physical and cultural places, resisting the mortal wave of global forces, but at the same time opening their arms, minds and hearts to others like them, to create wide coalitions of the discontents—in a process that is transforming their resistance into liberation.

The time has come to enclose the enclosers. Commoning—reclaiming and regenerating our commons and creating new commons beyond the dominant economic and political system—now defines the limits of the current era. “If the cell form of

capitalism is the commodity, the cellular form of a society beyond capital is the commons.” (Dyer-Whiteford, 2007)

Enclosing the Enclosers

Capitalism has been a continual war against autonomous subsistence, a war that defines the modern era. It started with the enclosure of the commons, continued uninterrupted during the last 500 years, and became more intense and violent during the neoliberal period with what has been called the “new enclosures.” The modern era, wrote Illich,

can be understood as that of an unrelenting 500-year war waged to destroy the environmental conditions for subsistence and to replace them by commodities produced within the frame of the new nation-state. In this war against popular cultures and their framework, the State was at first assisted by the clergies of the various churches, and later by the professionals and their institutional procedures. During this war, popular cultures and vernacular domains –areas of subsistence– were devastated on all levels. (Illich 1981, 139).

Zygmunt Bauman is probably right, paraphrasing Mark Twain, when he observes that the news that capitalism died seems somewhat exaggerated, given the extraordinary capacity of resurrection and regeneration this regime has demonstrated. (*The Guardian*, 10/18/2011). But it is useful, as a way to orient current social struggle, to explore whether capitalism’s natural parasitic capacity, causing it to feed off of other living organisms, will not be the cause of its own extinction.

The current limits to capital’s pattern of expansion have been the object of broad analysis in recent years while provoking a very intense theoretical debate among Marxists. For some of them, pre-capitalist procedures are being employed in a post-capitalist condition. Even though the system as a whole is still based on the appropriation

of surplus value in the productive sphere, in conventional Marxist terms, its dynamic is more and more in the hands of parasites. We would be living in a world of zombies dominated and controlled by vampires, and the latter could no longer be called “capitalists,” despite the fact that the main source of their accumulation is derived from a capitalist operation.

The plunder that characterizes this style of operation always confronts resistance and must resort, in order to impose itself, to pre-capitalist, colonial-style procedures based on the use of force. Even though zombies and vampires unite to actively displace workers from their achievements across 200 years of social struggle, their interests and behaviors separate and come into conflict, more so each time, as can be observed even in those that maintain, in a schizophrenic way, a dual condition.^v In any case, this is how the forces of capital are currently destroying the nation state, the political regime that was born with capitalism, and dismantling its democratic façade. Democracy was very useful for the expansion of capital and the operation of the market, but is an obstacle for dispossession, for the kind of violence now applied against autonomous subsistence.

If this is what we are dealing with, if this controversial hypothesis is correct, then social movements must adopt a radically different form of struggle. Many of them have begun to do it: their political intuitions also orient themselves towards a post-capitalist condition. The shape these movements are taking was clearly anticipated by Illich, who also described, in the tradition of Marx, the fundamental cell of the new society, currently emerging in the belly of the old: the commons.

All around the world, millions of people, perhaps billions, are enclosing the enclosers. They are not depriving the enclosers of their possessions, in a kind of reverse

expropriation. This is not what Marx anticipated. He assumed that the enclosure of the commons was the expropriation of the people by a few usurpers: the common land of the commoners, the majority of the people, expropriated by a few to create private property. (“Private,” in “private property,” implies *to deprive*.). Marxian revolution, to establish socialism, implied the transformation of private property into social property and would thus be the expropriation, by the people, of a few usurpers. (Marx 1959, T.I, 649). Today, this argument would be expressed by saying that the people, the majority of the people of the world, will expropriate the 80 persons (the usurpers) who have more material wealth than all of the world’s people combined; or, in terms of Occupy Wall Street if the 99% expropriated the wealth of the 1%.

Rather, today what the people are doing is to enact the institutional inversion anticipated by Illich—people dismantling and undermining the very foundation of capitalist operation and reclaiming autonomous subsistence. That is why we must replace communism, which has become a dirty word for many people, with commonism, the word coined by Nick Dyer-Whiteford (2007) to allude to the contemporary commons movement.

The Juxtaposition

There is today an intense search for a new social paradigm, under the assumption that the still dominant paradigm is already dead. A collection of essays produced around that theme has been presented in *Polis*, 11 (33). Writing for that issue, Manolo Callahan, a well-known Marxist, wrote “In Defense of Conviviality and the Collective Subject.” For him, such an urgent search for a new social paradigm requires reflection on the nature

of the current moment, which would be not only a particular set of “crises,” including an epochal crisis, but also an epistemological struggle. After observing that many social spaces “have become infused with or potentially animated by a conviviality,” he attempts to read Illich politically, much in the same way Harry Cleaver suggests for reading Marx, in order to engage him strategically.^{vi} “Toward that end, I briefly consider conviviality as a ‘methodology,’ or tool, for analysis and imagine it as a strategy in relation to an emerging ‘collective subject’.” Callahan applies this insight to the case of *Universidad de la Tierra Califas*, a project currently underway in the southern portion of the San Francisco Bay Area and Southern California. He reads “its engagement with conviviality through insurgent learning and convivial research, an autonomous political praxis that embraces a collective subject and insists that knowledge production is a fundamental dimension of popular democratic processes and pre-figurative politics. At the core of UT Califas’ convivial reconstruction is an effort to make learning an on-going dimension of democratic renewal.”^{vii}

This is just one example of the way in which Marx’s and Illich’s ideas are currently juxtaposed, in a fruitful way, in both theory and practice. Of course, in doing so we need to be fully aware of the radical differences between the two men and their thought. Any attempt to fuse the two sets of ideas into a single body of ideas may become counterproductive. One critical distinguishing point is the difference between Marx’s critique of the *capitalist* mode of production and Illich’s critique of the *industrial* mode of production.

Perhaps some Illichians may feel dragged out of their comfort zone if they are invited to acknowledge that Illich’s ideas can only flourish out of capitalism and the

current society—to accommodate Illich’s ideas within the dominant theoretical and institutional framework would amount to a betrayal. And if the question is to seriously examine the nature of the still dominant regime and its current condition, Marx continues to provide very good guidance, as Illich knew very well.

San Pablo Etlá, June 2015.

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ⁱ In the “Acknowledgements” of the book, for the English edition, Illich states that the thesis he will present in the book “was first formulated in a Spanish document co-authored by Valentina Borremans and myself and submitted as guideline for a meeting of two dozen Chilean socialists and other Latin Americans at CIDOC.” There are many Marxists among those whose influence he recognizes in the formulation of his ideas for the book.

ⁱⁱ **Development:** Three Sachs may symbolize the current situation about the development enterprise. Goldman Sachs, savage capitalism, may represent the dominant attitude in the elite, in governments and international institutions as well as private corporations. Jeffrey Sachs, philanthropic capitalism, represents attempts to take care directly of modernized misery, malaria, aids, civil war victims and other evils of capitalism and democratic despotism...to protect them and the development enterprise. Wolfgang Sachs, beyond development, symbolizes the attitude

of an increasing number of people, all over the world, resisting all forms of development, defending their own ways of life and government and taking new post-development initiatives.

Neoliberalism: While deregulation, privatization, and other policies of the Washington Consensus continue, the main neoliberal orientation –putting social life in the hands of the market- is dead. The World Bank, one of its most ardent promoters, abandoned it in 2007. The Latin American presidents, who were among its most devoted followers, organized the funeral in San Salvador in 2008. In his inaugural discourse, president Obama underlined that only the state could deal with the current economic predicament, and the Prime Minister Brown officially announced the death of neoliberalism in London, in March 2009, after the meeting of the G20. What we now have everywhere are forms of “state capitalism”, the expression used to describe the Soviet tradition and now transformed into a general practice, as a substitute for the neoliberal illusion of a market ruled economy. Of course, if we see neoliberalism as the expression of a new balance of political forces created after people’s defeat when they tried to “assault heaven” in the 1960s, after the most important cultural revolution of the XX century, neoliberalism is still using the previous political structure to impose on the people an outrageous exploitation and continue dismantling what they achieved in the last 200 years of social struggle. But the structure itself is falling apart, as the balance of political forces rapidly changes.

American empire: The US continues to be the most powerful country in the world, in both economic and military terms. Many people, particularly in the left, are still alluding to the American empire, but the weakened hegemonic power of the United States can no longer rule the world (See Wallerstein 2003 and Esteva 2009).

Capitalism: Capitalism is technically dead, at least as we know it. A combination of the structural contradictions determining the “terminal phase” of capitalism, which according to Wallerstein started in 1968 (2005), the irresponsible behavior associated with “market fundamentalism”, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, as Soros warned (Esteva 2009), and many other factors, would have determined the end of this regime: it can no longer reproduce itself in the terms defining the capitalist mode of production, as the relation between the owners of the means of productions and the owners of their labor force.

Economic society: As economic activities are being reembedded into society and culture and ethics and politics are coming back to the center of social life, the economic society, in both capitalist and socialist forms, constricted on the premise of scarcity, has already entered into a process that seems to define a long agony.

Modernity and postmodernity: The emerging pluralistic system of reference is not compatible with the modern paradigm, which is no longer valid. The new paradigm emerging from the grassroots implies that we are already beyond both modernity and postmodernity.

Patriarchal mentality. The current crises may be seen as the final collapse of 5,000 years of patriarchal mentality.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Comunalidad* is a neologism coined independently by two indigenous intellectuals of Oaxaca, Mexico, in order to share with others their way of being and thinking, as an active we, a

communal subject defining the first layer of personal identity. Commonality, mixing commons and polity, is not a proper translation but gives an idea of the intention.

^{iv} Illich dedicated many essays, in the last years of his life, to make evident how we were leaving behind the era of tools and entering into the era of systems.

^v The Mexican Carlos Slim competes with Bill Gates to be the richest man on Earth. He is a successful entrepreneur, with many capitalist enterprises, a zombie, and also a vampire, with mines, real state and financial speculation.

^{vi} A political reading takes as its perspective the working class and “self consciously and unilaterally structures its approach to determine the meaning and relevance of *every concept* to the immediate development of working class struggle.” (Cleaver 2001, 30)

^{vii} Insurgent learning is a “new form of learning: a kind of learning nourished by the experiences and sensitivity of old fighters and by new ideas that desecrate the sanctuaries of power.” (Cecena 2012, 113)