

**Ivan Illich's Radical Thought
and the Convivial Solution to the Ecological Crisis**

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Over the last decades our world has been threatened by multiple environmental issues that have generated debates over the future survival of the human species on this planet: climate change, ocean acidification, ozone depletion, the emission of phosphorous and nitrogen in the atmosphere, the non-orthodox management of toxic waste, the exhaustion of food and water supplies, the loss of biodiversity and the destruction of ecosystems, are only some of the main issues. (Foster, 2010; Bollier, 2013) The impact of these multiple issues has led modern science to formulate the existence of a new geological era for our planet, the *anthropocene*, in order to indicate the central role played by humans in the balance of life on earth.

Although from a purely scientific perspective the causes enumerated herein seem to provide a thorough overview of the main risk factors that might determine the next environmental crises, it is necessary however to assess the historical causes that have led humanity to the verge of catastrophe. Particularly important is to analyze the controversial relationship between man and nature over the course of history. The current alienation of humanity from the ecosphere has indeed historical causes that are motivated by the evolution of accumulation processes from ‘The First Great Transition’—that is, the invention of agriculture roughly 12,000 years ago—to industrial capitalism. (Pointing, 2007; Kovel, 2002) As shown by environmental history, although human-environment controversies are present since the dawn of

organized societies, capitalism has played a central role in exacerbating these issues. The dynamics of capitalist accumulation, the relentless extraction and transformation of natural resources into goods and products necessary to achieve “growth” and “development”¹—these are but a few examples of the role played by capitalism.

It is indeed evident that the evolution of capitalism over the last centuries has resulted in a consistent intensification of the volume of environmental issues thereby highlighting the conflict between production processes and the survival of the human race. These processes were emphasized by Karl Marx, who pointed out that the relentless drive for profit through the production of *surplus* that characterizes industrial capitalism is embedded in an economic system where exchange-value is preferred to use-value and where workers are disempowered by their lack of control over the means of production. According to Marx, this endemic dynamic of capitalism generates a relentless expansion of economic production way beyond the goals previously accomplished, and as a consequence the uncontrolled and intensive extraction of natural resources relentlessly push the environmental balance of our planet to the brink of ecological crisis. (Kovel, 2002, pp. 28-48) The dynamic of capitalistic accumulation described by Marx is therefore the cause of a “metabolic rift,” or the alienation between man and environment. (Kovel, 2002, p.129) A primal consequence of this metabolic rift is what James O’Connor has defined as the second contradiction of capitalism—indicative of its inherent ecologically destructive actions. Indeed, apart from creating social inequalities by polarizing the means of production—the so-called first contradiction of capitalism—O’Connor points out how the current system also impairs the natural conditions of production, generating

¹ For more information over the relation between man and nature in human evolution, the following books are suggested: Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*, New York 1999 e *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, New York 2006; Clive Ponting, *A Green History of the World: The Environment and the Collapse of Great Civilizations* e Ian Simmons, *Global Environmental History, 10,000 BC to AD 2000*, Edinburgh 2008.

ecological crises that contribute to the decrease of profitability and to accumulation of crises. (Foster, 2009, pp. 203-209) Although Marx's concept of metabolic rift is mainly related to trends of industrial capitalism developed from the end of the eighteenth century, following Fernand Braudel's historical analysis of the dynamics of capitalist accumulation, it is possible to extend this phenomenon to multiple eras of human history. (Braudel, 1977) As pointed out by Henri Pirenne, "... for each period into which our economic history may be divided, there is a distinct and separate class of capitalists"; in other words, every stage of human history has been characterized by the rise of an economically-wise hegemonic class that has replaced an old order and favored new socio-environmental transitions. (Pirenne, 1914, p. 494) Therefore, analyzing the history of organized societies, it is possible to detect economic mechanisms based on the accumulation of labor and natural resources through the indiscriminate exploitation of the environment.

However, over history, human-environment relations have also enjoyed more harmonious ecological-economic configurations, both in the management of natural resources and in the accumulation of surplus from the ecosystem in order to ensure human survival. Actually, more than an economic model, it is probably more appropriate to talk about a homogeneous set of secular values and practices that have permeated the existence of every organized society, articulating their lifestyle, their relations with the natural world and consequently determining their times of action and of existence. This complex universe of traditions and habits is known under the term of "commons."

According to Jonathan Rowe, one of the main scholars of commons over the last decades, commons are first of all a complex social system of interactions between humans, natural resources, and properties, where the first two play a much more

important role than properties. (Rowe, 2013, p. 103) Although nowadays the universe of commons has expanded to other social spheres, such as culture, science and digital technologies, natural resources constitute the most ancient and important form of common property, incorporating assets like air, water, sun, trees that are of vital importance for the survival of the human species and of life in general. Moreover, they are proof of the indissoluble bond between mankind and nature, which by far are much more important than the connection between humans and markets, that many times have been responsible for the spoliation and expropriation of commons.

Hence, within the idea of commons lies the possibility of promoting environmental sustainability on a global scale, connecting the universe of collective properties to ecological thought. If the socio-environmental system of resources management typical of commons has been gradually subdued to market dynamics, nowadays the crisis of contemporary capitalism is favoring a new springtime for the universe of collective properties. First, numerous historical studies have shown the validity and the importance of commons over history.² Second, social inequalities and the worsening of environmental threats that nowadays are wracking the globalized world are also bringing back the model of commons into the agendas of politicians and activists worldwide. (Bollier, 2014)

The Triple-Helix Model: Commons As A Tool for The Promotion of Green Governance Strategies

In order to understand the complex universe of the commons and its relation to ecology, it is necessary to distinguish between *common-pool resources* and *commons*.

² An example is the famous study by Paolo Grossi, *Un altro modo di possedere*. The book retraces the history of commons in the European juridical tradition, highlighting the ideals that, since the end of the 19th century, have shown the natural character of collective properties and their utility in Italian economic dynamics, in opposition to the mainstream tendency of the time, based upon agrarian individualism and private property.

“Common-pool resources” include a set of natural resources available for potential users that are distributed on a multi-scalar geographical perspective according to their characteristics. (Bollier, 2013; Rowe, 2013; Grassi, 1977) The expression “commons” includes instead a regime of administration of common-pool resources based on common property agreements through self-organization and the autonomous management of resources by the community. (Bollier, 2013) As for natural commons, it is possible to describe them as a geographical area whose resources are shared by the local community following a set of pre-established rules. (Martinez-Alier, 2003, p. 74)

According to this approach, it is possible to divide the universe of commons into six general categories: subsistence commons, indigenous commons, digital commons, social/civic commons, market commons and state commons. (Bollier, 2013, p. 158) Thus, the universe of commons combines the management of common-pool resources with other forms of natural and digital resource management such as private property or with centralized planning policies, thus creating a new economy that does not reject the role of markets, only condemning its most predatory aspects. (Bollier, 2014, p. 5). In other words, Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom’s work has constituted a milestone in promoting a positive approach to commons, in contrast to the neoclassical Hardinian “tragedy of the commons” approach showing how collective forms of resource management have been common to numerous human societies in different historical, geographical and cultural contexts. (Bollier, 2013, p. 148)³

³ In the academic literature, the idea of the inadequacy of the commons as a resource management system at the base of human societies was popularized by the famous essay, *The Tragedy of the Commons*, written in 1968 by biologist Garret Hardin. Hardin attempted to demonstrate the failure of commons in managing resources, as they were destined to crash against the rational and predatory nature of human beings. However, without beginning a debate on the dialectic nature of the human species, continuously shifting between altruism and egoism, it is evident that the pessimistic scenario described by Hardin presents a superficial vision of human existential dynamics. As observed by environmentalist and cultural studies advocate, E.P. Thompson, Hardin’s analysis

As for the relation between commons and the environment, Ostrom's vision basically considers commons as a sustainable modality for the management of natural resources that would preserve the long-term livability of the environment and foster legal and political reforms based on participation, social equality and sustainability. It is not a coincidence that nowadays the main interpretation of commons sees them as a tool for the promotion of a *green governance* model that implies overriding the traditional state-market dualism, proposing a triarchic model that associates the already renowned influence of states and markets to those of commons. (Bollier, 2013, p. 195) In other words, commons are seen as the privileged vehicle for the creation of a green governance regime that would ensure the observance of environmental rights from a local, regional, national and global point of view, through the creation of an innovative legal system based on traditional practices and institutional reforms aimed at promoting direct democracy. (Bollier, 2013, p. 19)

Following this pattern, many associations and funds for the preservation and sustainable management of natural resources have been developed, in order to preserve the environment from classical capitalistic short-term mechanisms. A valid example is the *Pacific Forest Trust* in the United States, promoting the protection of forests from indiscriminate clearance of arboreal species thanks to the legal acquisition of the right of utilization over the territory, rights that are never exercised. (Rowe, 2013, p. 98) Here, the endemic tension between the qualities and characteristics expressed by proponents of commons and those of markets emerges with particular evidence. (Bollier, 2013, p. 145)

mirrors a pro-market vision of the world that ignores entire centuries of history of successful resource management based on commons and promoted by self-organized communities. Indeed, as Thompson has observed, commoners "were not without common sense," as they organized their own community around collective properties thanks to positive human qualities such as altruism, conviviality, and common sense, characteristics that are proper of human nature as much as the cynic rationalism described by Hardin.

Although still maintaining a strong communitarian component as well as a certain heterodoxy compared to purely capitalist resource management models, the commons approach to sustainability shows interest in ideals corresponding to what Martinez-Alier has defined as the “gospel of eco-efficiency.” This is a liberal idea of environmentalism whose aims are mainly concentrated on the attempt to promote sustainable development and management models, without however questioning the basic assumptions of capitalist market economy. (Martinez-Alier, 2003, p. 14) In addition to placing side by side commons with states and markets, advocates of this school of thought also theorize the substantial dependence of commons on states and markets, as they represent an hybrid form of property. (Bollier, 2014, p. 69)

Commons According to Ivan Illich

The mainstream vision of commons as an integrated tool of contemporary market economy for the promotion of green governance finds opposition in Ivan Illich’s theories on conviviality and communitarism. According to the Austrian thinker, the universe of commons can be interpreted as a complex set of convivial subsistence practices for the management of natural resources, administered through a complex system of non-written laws. As the author describes them:

People called commons those parts of the environment for which customary law exacted specific forms of community respect. People called commons that part of the environment which lay beyond their own thresholds and outside of their own possessions, to which, however, they had recognized claims of usage, not to produce commodities but to provide for the subsistence of their households. The customary law which humanized the environment by establishing the commons was usually unwritten. It was unwritten law not only because people did not care to write it down, but because what it protected was a reality much too complex to fit into paragraphs. The law of the commons regulated the right of way, the right to fish and to hunt, to graze, and to collect wood or medicinal plants in the forest. (Illich, 1992, p. 49)

Thus, commons form the core of a society centered on subsistence activities related to an idea of community and it emerges as a set of vernacular practices enhancing the convivial side of human relations, in contrast with the mainstream vision that considers it as a simple political and legislative tool. As observed by Illich, the term “vernacular” has an Indo-Germanic derivation that corresponds to the word “root,” indicating the connection with past local cultures. This word was later adopted by the Latin language with the expression *vernaculum*, indicating an object produced or generated in a domestic environment, in contrast to those obtained through market exchange. (Illich, 1981, p. 57) In this vision, it is not the complementarity between commons and markets that is the key for solving the main contradictions and plagues affecting the capitalist system. Rather, the solution lies in the individuation of the limits to capitalist development and the substitution of the means of industrial production with convivial tools. As Illich has observed,

The alternative to managerial fascism is a political process by which people decide how much of any scarce resource is the most any member of society can claim; a process in which they agree to keep limits relatively stationary over a long time, and by which they set a premium on the constant search for new ways to have an ever larger percentage of the population join in doing ever more with ever less. Such a political choice of a frugal society remains a pious dream unless it can be shown that it is not only necessary but also possible: (1) to define concrete procedures by which more people are enlightened about the nature of our present crisis and will come to understand that limits are necessary and a convivial life style desirable; (2) to bring the largest number of people into now suppressed organizations which claim their right to a frugal life style and keep them satisfied and therefore committed to convivial life; and (3) to discover and revalue the political or legal tools that are accepted within a society and learn how to use them to establish and protect convivial life where it emerges. Such procedures may sound idealistic at the present moment. This is not proof that they cannot become effective as the present crisis deepen. (Illich, 1973, p. 25)

As shown by Illich, the restoration of convivial values in modern society through a radical political process would allow the creation of a new triadic relation between individuals, means of production and collectivity. The main aim of commons

therefore should be the creation of a convivial society, where technology could be adopted not in order to enhance the separation between individuals, society and the environment, but to realign the human sphere to society and the eco-system, thus improving in a crucial way relations between individuals (Illich, 1973, p. xii). The convivial society theorized by Illich is grounded in a less hierarchical vision of society and implies collective and communitarian patterns of production. In this sense, the idea of commons as the vehicle for the promotion of vernacular and convivial values promoted by Illich, retraces simple and essential anti-capitalist and communitarian values that have characterized several indigenous societies in the course of human history. As Gustavo Esteva has observed, “[Illich] 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.” (Esteva, 2015, p. 76)

The Great Transformation of the Commons and Its Socio-environmental Consequences

According to Illich, the root of the transition from convivial societies based on natural commons to modern industrial capitalism revolving around private properties lies in socio-economic and technological transformations that happened in the western world beginning in the Middle Ages. The starting point of all experts on commons is the assumption that during the feudal era, before the triumph of capitalism over collective properties, farmers enjoyed land rights comparable to owners with the only difference being that the lands were available for use to all the farmers dwelling in the

area. (Rowe, 2013, p. 44) Nevertheless, Illich's analysis encompasses socio-economic and cultural changes that occurred among European societies during the Middle Ages, eventually leading to the rise of capitalism and to the wrecking of convivial societies. (Illich, 1973, p. 17)

In particular, drawing from the first contradiction of capitalism formulated by Karl Marx—that is, the separation of the workers from the means of production—Ilich points out how capitalism implied the cancellation of convivial cultures from the past whose lifestyle was based on subsistence activities, in favor of a society based on market economy, large-scale production, waged work, and technological tools of production. Hence, Illich's idea is that “in both theory and practice all development means the transformation of subsistence-oriented cultures and their integration into an economic system. Development always entails the expansion of a formally economic sphere at the expense of subsistence-oriented activities.” (Illich, 1992, p. 21)

Naturally, this phenomenon provoked several socio-environmental issues that affected mainly low-income classes that were frozen out from modernization processes, as their survival was seriously threatened by the privatization of commons. As observed by Illich:

The modern age 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, p. 139)

The main phenomenon that can be observed in the transformation from the convivial culture of commons to the so-called *enclosures* movement, is the creation of

a production-oriented culture based on the concept of resource scarcity and on mechanisms of differential inclusion. This process has been defined by Illich as the “hierarchical modernization of poverty,” a global trend consisting in the combination of a “lack of power over circumstances with a loss of personal potency.” (Illich, 1971, p. 4) In modern societies this goal was accomplished with the approval of political institutions that acted through the already mentioned tools for social control such as languages and conventional education. (Illich, 1971, p. 15-21)

Here, the affinity of the Austrian thinker with Karl Marx is very evident, especially in relation to the issues concerning the separation between workers and means of production and the consequent phenomenon of alienated labor.⁴ Therefore, drawing from Marx, Illich coined the concept of the “industrialization of man,” or the normalization of production schemes conventionally known under the definition of “work.” However, such a transformation cannot be considered anymore as the simple action of “working,” but as one of the tools of a society founded on hierarchical political and legislative schemes and on the centralization of production dynamics in the hands of a privileged elite of capitalists. (Illich 1973, p. 96-97)

This historical process created an unequal division of labor that fostered the consolidation of an hegemonic class capable of redirecting production schemes through unilateral accumulation, the exploitation of labor, the idea of scarcity and the polarization of social classes according to mechanisms of differential inclusion. (Illich, 1973, p. 74) This process implied a total control of the main moments of industrial production, both in regard to resource supply or *input*, and of production, or *output*. In turn, this generated what Illich defines as “the worst form of

⁴ As observed by Gustavo Esteva, although today Marxists tend not to read Illich and vice versa, “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.” (Esteva, 2015, pp. 77-78)

discrimination”: the hierarchical economic organization of society, or the division between rich and poor people. (Illich, 1973, p. 74) The result of this process today is an anthropic reality, a “man-made environment” based on hierarchical mechanisms that are hard to decipher for mankind. As observed by Illich, “the man-made environment has become as inscrutable as nature is for the primitive.” (Illich, 1971, p. 35)

Naturally, the hierarchical division of modern society also permeated a series of socio-cultural spheres that are very important for the articulation of times and modalities of material life and that have created a series of “radical monopolies.” Radical monopolies are a system of domination over products and services that are not simply restricted to the choices of beneficiaries, as they constitute the only instrument for controlling and satisfying needs while at the same time nullifying the development of feasible alternatives. (Illich, 1973, p. 55) Moreover, radical monopolies also exercise psychological control over the individual, creating a new dimension of subjection: “psychological impotence, the inability to fend for themselves.” (Illich, 1971, p. 4) Obviously, this process has been responsible for serious environmental damage. Too, the destruction of convivial societies has permeated every aspect of society, eliminating all forms of communitarian practices.

The normalization of the individual and the production of new human subjectivities corresponding to a market logic grounded in exploitation has been implemented through a series of devices for social control. As pointed out by Illich, today mankind moves and expresses its own vitality through a “pan-hygienic world: a world in which all contacts between men, and between men and their world, are the result of foresight and manipulation.” (Illich 1971, p. 47) The main pan-hygienic spheres described by Illich are language, the education system, science and

centralized planning. Throughout history, these spheres have functioned as tools for social control and the manipulation of human consciousness.

This phenomenon has also been defined by Illich as “shadow work,” or a form of contribution to the capitalist economy that is not easily detectable through traditional quantitative/qualitative analysis, but that produces tangible effects that emerge in the form of invisible discrimination and indirect social control. (Illich, 1981, pp. 100-101) In order to clarify the meaning as well as the significant implications of shadow work, Illich has indicated four main mystifications—or masks—that apply to it: 1) the relegation of women to marginal or subordinated tasks in modern societies masked as an appeal to biology; 2) social activities that, although produce benefits for people, are considered to be non-productive and therefore receive little or no acknowledgement; 3) the assignment of shadow prices to behaviors and practices normally out of the economic market, such as crime, leisure, learning and fertility; and 4) the unequal management of the job market according to the category of gender. (Illich, 1981, pp. 108-109) Among these categories, it is evident that the main and most ancient tool for social control was language, the privileged instrument in providing essential values for the creation of community based on equality and democracy. (Illich, 1973, p. 99)

Retracing the history of language from its origins to our days, Illich shows how human societies formed around “vernacular” practices were able to utilize different idioms that were learned through their direct practice.⁵ On the contrary, modern nation-states have codified their own national language, also known as “mother tongue” that nowadays is taught in all modern schools. Therefore, the transition from vernacular languages learned through direct interaction, to mother

⁵ As explained by Illich, the word *vernacular* has an Indo-Germanic origin and it was used to express concepts such as “root” or “household”; whereas in Latin the word *vernaculum* was used in order to describe any object born, grown or created among the domestic walls. Further information are available in Illich, 1981, p. 57.

tongues taught in schools represents the most significant step in the creation of capitalist modernity: from subsistence societies based on use-value, to centralized planning for the creation of monetary affluence through markets. (Illich, 1981, p. 44)

In other words, one of the main steps in the transition from a social order based on subsistence to the capitalist modernity was the transformation of languages from expression of a shared socio-cultural identity to a tool of cultural hegemony aimed at helping people orient themselves within the controversial and de-humanizing landscapes of modernity. (Illich, 1981, p. 63)

It is not a coincidence that the term “mother tongue” was adopted for the first time during the Carolingian era by a group of Catholic monks from Gorz Abbey, close to the French city of Verdun, replacing Latin as the official language for religious functions when speaking from the pulpit.⁶ Therefore, as Illich has reminded, “*mother tongue*, since the term was first used, has never meant the vernacular, but rather its contrary.” (Illich, 1981, p. 58) Why the concept of “mother tongue” was formulated in this period lies in the need to accomplish social control, the extension of territorial claims and the consolidation of hegemony through language that culminated in the codification of vernacular languages. Indeed, the Abbey of Gorz was the center of a real technological revolution that had crucial importance for the imperialistic expansion of Europe. For instance, the invention of the horse-led plow allowed those who controlled such innovative means of production to go beyond mere subsistence, favoring a better crop rotation and consequently to achieve wealth accumulation and economic profit. Illich writes,

It seems quite probable that Gorz was then at the center of the diffusion of a new technology that was crucial for the later imperial expansion of European powers: the transformation of the horse into the tractor of choice. Four Asiatic inventions – the horseshoe, the fixed saddle and stirrup, the bit and the

⁶ It is indeed during the Carolingian that society started to be increasingly based on institutions and as a consequence priests started to be seen as professional educators and school teachers. (Illich, 1981, p. 59)

cummett (the collar resting on the shoulder) – permitted important and extensive changes. One horse could replace six oxen. While supplying the same traction, and more speed, a horse could be fed on the acreage needed for one yoke of oxen. Because of its speed, the horse permitted a more extensive cultivation of the wet, northern soils, in spite of the short summers. Also, greater rotation of crops was possible. But even more importantly, the peasant could now tend fields twice as far away from his dwelling. A new pattern of life became possible. [...] In these circumstances, the monks of Gorz, made language, vernacular language, into an issue to defend their territorial claims. The monks began to preach in Frankish, and spoke specifically about the value of the Frankish tongue. They began to use the pulpit as a forum to stress the importance of language itself, perhaps even to teach it. (Illich, 1981, p. 62)

In addition, Illich mentions the Catholic king, Alphonse of Aragon, the first king who decided to adopt a vernacular language as the tool for communicating with his people. Illich notes the attempt of Spanish linguist, Elio Antonio de Nebrija, to convince Queen Elizabeth of Castilla of the importance of language as a tool for social control to be accompanied by institutional power—the so-called merging of *armas y letras*. These examples show how the formation of the first modern European state lie not only in the economic changes following the discovery of the American continent and to the authority of the Church and the State, but also in the role of language as a cultural device for consolidating hegemony. (Illich, 1981, p. 36-37)

Evidence of the nexus between the standardization of vernacular language and the advance of modernity during this historical era was supported by the invention of industrial printing that allowed the capillary diffusion of texts thereby fostering propaganda. (Illich, 1981, p. 40) The advance of modernization processes in the Spanish kingdom represented, according to Illich, the first official declaration of war on subsistence waged by modern States endeavoring to increase their affluence through economic and socio-cultural reforms. (Illich, 1992, p. 16) Therefore, if the transition from material life sustained by commons to a capitalist economy was fueled by the economic breakthrough that Karl Polanyi defined as “The Great

Transformation,” Illich demonstrates how forms of social control such as language and instruction through schooling were able to consistently foster this process. In other words, we might affirm that to the geographic enclosures, Illich added precious insights over the development of the enclosures of the mind.

Beyond Sustainability and Ecology: Conviviality and The Creation of A Sustainable Society

Drawing from past socio-economic experiences, Illich explains how historically, human civilizations were based on a set of non-written rules, known as vernacular laws, reflecting traditional activities and ways of living. However, as already shown, the development of the enclosure movement resulted in an irreversible alteration of land regulation and property relations and in a radical change in the relationship between mankind and the environment. The progressive destruction of commons that followed was the basis for the construction of a new ecological order, mirroring a “radical change in the attitudes of society towards the environment.”

(Illich, 1992, p. 50) It is not a coincidence indeed that the beginning of the “Age of Reason” in the Anglo-Saxon world during the 17th century and the consequent rise of the enclosure movement also coincided with the rise of the ecological movement.

(Worster, 1977, pp. 2-3)

However, in Illich we find his recognition of the contradictions within contemporary environmentalism and ecology in general. The main issue within the environmental movement according to his analysis lies in the lack of foresight in assessing the main historical cause of the current ecological issues that today are wracking our world: the dispossession of commons. (Illich, 1992, p. 53) In this sense, sustainability and ecology are concepts constructed by modern society in order to

justify and defend a world of socio-economic inequalities and relentless consumption. (Illich, 2015, p. 16) In fact, in modern capitalist societies, energy constitutes one of the main tools for social control, as it is connected to concepts such as “crisis” and “scarcity” that determine the creation of a stratified society following the principle of differential inclusion:

The assumption of scarcity is fundamental to economics, and formal economics is the study of values under this assumption. But scarcity, and therefore all that can be meaningfully analyzed by formal economics, has been of marginal importance in the lives of most people through most of history. The spread of activity into all aspects of life can be chronicled; it has occurred in European civilization since the Middle Ages. Under the expanding assumption of scarcity, peace acquired a new meaning, one without precedent anywhere but in Europe. Peace came to mean *pax æconomica*. *Pax æconomica* is a balance between formally ‘economic’ powers. (Illich, 1992, p. 19)

Modern society with its traditional values is therefore the main obstacle in achieving a convivial society based on commons that would prevent “the expansion of scarcity perceptions within a community.” (Illich, 1992, p. 10) The *pax æconomica* introduced as a means of protection of the European modernity is considered by Illich as a zero-sum game, where social and economic disparities are guaranteed by mechanisms of differential inclusion that are intrinsic to capitalism. Moreover, the modern capitalist order has created a clash between human and environmental interests generating a situation where “by the rules of the zero-sum game, both the environment and human work are scarce stakes; as one gains the other loses.” (Illich, 1992, p. 23) In this regard, Illich points out that, on a metabolic level, going beyond a certain threshold of energy consumption is functional to the creation of a technocratic society, where the means of production are not directly controlled by the worker but by the few people that really retain control over the means of production. The preservation of this privilege is mainly possible thanks to the narrative of “resource

scarcity” promoted and fostered by mainstream politics. According to this vision, important sources of energy are on the verge of exhaustion and therefore it is necessary to adopt strict forms of control of human energy that have to be channeled in firm production schemes.

Obviously, this process is responsible for the mechanization of energy production as well as for the exploitation of human energy as a mechanical source of power. Hence, in modern capitalistic societies the alleged necessity to optimize productive processes justifies the perpetration of socio-economic injustices and environmental degradation that Illich has defined as the “margins of disutility” of capitalism. (Illich, 1973, p. 33) It is exactly this normalization process, and the consequent subjection of humans to dynamics of capitalist production, that is a major cause of current ecological issues:

The exhaustion and pollution of the earth's resources is, above all, the result of a corruption in man's self-image, of a regression in his consciousness. Some would like to speak about a mutation of collective consciousness which leads to a conception of man as an organism dependent not on nature and individuals, but rather on institutions. (Illich, 1971, p. 48)

This process would not be possible if ecology did not consistently stoke up biological science, a social control tool par excellence, as it represents “a label under which a broad, politically organized general public analyzes and influences technical decisions.” (Illich, 1992, p. 48) In other words, ecology is one of the concepts functional to the separation of society from the natural world, because it preaches an holistic vision aimed at conciliating these two universes that normally are arbitrarily considered as divided. (Illich, 2015, pp. 120-121)

It is not a coincidence, indeed, that the word “ecology” was developed during the 1970s as an answer to the urgency for individuating limits on the exploitation of natural resources in order to deal with the incessant attacks of capitalism on society

and on the natural environment. (Illich, 1992, p. 21) If the concept of ecology is directly related to market economy, practices for the management of commons through vernacular laws constitute the basis for a lifestyle truly in harmony with nature. (Illich, 1992, p. 121) A society based on subsistence through the utilization of commons would be directly proportional to a low-energy consumption society and would guarantee more equality and a better socio-environmental balance. (Illich 1992, pp. 73-74) Additionally, according to Illich, it is necessary to create a convivial society based on production schemes counterpoised to those of industrial societies, where the separation of workers from the means of production would be replaced by a set of relations between individuals, based on principles such as creativity, social justice, subsistence and independent work. Such a society would be in much more harmony with the environment and able to promote social change and different forms of education through participative democracy. (Illich, 1973, pp. 11-13)

However, Illich's idea of revolutionizing human societies and the natural world through convivial values and practices is not merely based on activities of subsistence drawn from the past, but it suggests a mingling with modern technologies that could be put at the service of a more socially equal and sustainable society. Illich has observed, "These new vanguards conceive technical progress as one possible instrument to support a new type of value, neither traditional nor industrial, but both subsistence-oriented and rationally chosen. [...] Modern tools make it possible to subsist on activities which permit a variety of evolving life-styles, and relieve much of the drudgery of old-time subsistence." (Illich, 1981, p. 25)

The main condition necessary for achieving this change is based on the distinction between the ecosystem as a set of commons "within which people's subsistence activities are embedded," and as a set of resources to exploit for the

accumulation of wealth. (Illich, 1992, p. 48) Starting from this premise it would be possible to imagine a society that could promote more equitable forms of energy utilization and a more equal distribution of the energetics available. (Illich, 1973, p. 28) Clearly, this process would mean the return to more balanced forms of energy distribution pertaining to non-industrialized society. However, it is possible, according to Illich, to include within this paradigm more advanced technologies that could contribute to relieving mankind from strenuous work, creating decentralized production models that would adopt tools, rules and resources within everyone's means and in perfect socio-environmental balance:

While people have begun to accept ecological limits on maximum per capita energy use as a condition for physical survival, they do not yet think about the use of minimum feasible power as the foundation of various social orders that would be both modern and desirable. Yet only a ceiling on energy use can lead to social relations that are characterized by high levels of equity. [...] What is generally overlooked is that equity and energy can grow concurrently only to a point. Below a threshold of per capita wattage, motors improve the conditions for social progress. Above this threshold, energy grows at the expense of equity. Further energy affluence then means decreased distribution of control over that energy. [...] The choice of a minimum-energy economy compels the poor to abandon fantastical expectations and the rich to recognize their vested interest as a ghastly liability. (Illich, 2015, pp. 75-77)

The awareness that environmental crises within modern societies can be initiated with the privatization of the commons is one of the most important breakthroughs of Illich's radical thought. Tragically, modern human societies do not take into account this fundamental issue, mainly due to a lack of awareness over the relationship between environmental degradation and the spoliation of commons that, according to Illich, has contributed to the failure of environmental and social justice movements over the years:

For almost a thousand years many political parties have challenged the accumulation of environmental resources in private hands. However, the issue was argued in terms of the private utilization of these resources, not the

extinction of commons. Thus anti-capitalist politics so far have bolstered the legitimacy of transforming commons into resources. (Illich, 1992, p. 51)

It is only over the last years that part of the civil society, led by what Illich has defined as a new class of “popular intellectuals has started to understand the important connection between environmental issues that are increasingly threatening our globalized world and the dissolution of subsistence activities based on commons. (Illich, 1973, p. 48) There is nowadays a global movement that goes beyond nations, political ideologies and social classes that is highlighting the significant inconsistencies of technocratic mythologies. At the same time, this movement proposes the legitimate suspicion that “something is structurally wrong with the vision of the *homo faber*,” a suspicion that according to Illich, “belongs to people of all classes, incomes, faiths and civilizations. (Illich, 1973, p. 48). What unites this heterogeneous group of citizens is not classic political ideology, but literally, “the sense of being trapped,” or the lack of faith in the behavior of modern institutions derived by “the awareness that most new policies adopted by broad consensus consistently lead to results which are glaringly opposed to their stated aims.” (Illich, 1971, p. 48) This awareness is translating today into a radical opposition to the reality of the enclosures and to the economic schemes connected to it, while the ideology of the commons is beginning to gain new consideration in the collective consciousness and within modern political agendas. As observed by Illich:

Enclosure once accepted, redefines community. Enclosure undermines the local autonomy of community. Enclosure of the commons is thus as much in the interest of professionals and of state bureaucrats as it is in the interest of capitalists. Enclosure allows the bureaucrat to define local community as impotent to provide for its own survival. People become economic individuals who depend for their survival on commodities that are produced for them. (Illich, 1992, pp. 51-52).

It is in this same critique of the privatization of natural resources that lies the elements of real revolutionary change at the core of Illich's radical thought, because as pointed out by the same author, "fundamentally, most citizens' movements represent a rebellion against this environmentally-induced redefinition of people as consumers." (Illich, 1992, p. 52) To this Illich adds the obvious need to fight against "the consumer ethos," the "institutionalization of substantive values," and therefore to endeavor to "find a new balance in the global milieu depending on the deinstitutionalization of values." (Illich, 1971, p. 48)

Therefore, if the "time has come to enclose the enclosers," creating an equal and more sustainable society through practices of communing, it is also important to take into account Ivan Illich's radical thought. (Esteva, 2015, p. 87) Illich is able to lucidly assess the main contradictions within the capitalist system and to demonstrate how commons could constitute a system of universal practices for human societies, as they are based on principles shared by all mankind, regardless of cultural and geographical barriers. To follow Ivan Illich's radical thought, would imply for modern social movements to redefine their own agenda, thus promoting convivial instances that, in opposition to values such as wealth and profit-seeking, would generate a social system based on subsistence, thus leading the world to a post-capitalist transition. In other words, Illich reminds us that "we must replace communism, which has become a dirty word for many people, with communism." (Esteva, 2015, p. 90)

However, it is not through simple ideologies that it would be possible to reverse the actual socioeconomic mainstream trend and to face present and future environmental threats. As observed by Illich, revolutionary change will never happen through the promotion of a new ideology, but due to the shared interest that a vast

majority of the members of civil society will have in implementing those changes. Naturally, shared interests present themselves as a reflection of ideas and practices based on conviviality, as “only an active majority in which all individuals and groups insist for their own reasons on their own rights, and whose members share the same convivial procedure, can revive the rights of men against corporations.” (Illich, 1973, p. 107). Illich observes:

The alternative to managerial fascism is a political process by which people decide how much of any scarce resource is the most any member of society can claim: a process in which they agree to keep limits relatively stationary over a long time, and by which they set a premium on the constant search for new ways to have an even larger percentage of the population join in doing ever more with ever less. Such a political choice of a frugal society remains a pious dream unless it can be shown that it is not only necessary, but also possible: (1) to define concrete procedures by which more people are enlightened about the nature of our present crisis and will come to understand that limits are necessary and a convivial life style desirable; (2) to bring the largest number of people into now suppressed organization which claim their right to a frugal life style and keep them satisfied and therefore committed to convivial life; and (3) to discover or revalue the political or legal tools that are accepted within a society and learn how to use them to establish and protect convivial life where it emerges. Such procedures may sound idealistic at the present moment. (Illich, 1973, p. 109)

Thus, the convivial society foreseen by Illich goes way beyond the actual destructive ecological trend, promoting egalitarian socioeconomic relations and a more sustainable world through convivial practices. The implementation of convivial practices could thus generate a better socio-environmental balance fostering social equity and allow for the critical assessment of the issues related to the current environmental crisis.

The only solution to the environmental crisis is the shared insight of people that they would be happier if they could work together and care for each other. Such an inversion of the current world view requires intellectual courage for it exposes us to the unenlightened yet painful criticism of being not only anti-people and against economic progress, but equally against liberal education and scientific and technological advance. We must face the fact that the imbalance between man and the environment is just one of several mutually

reinforcing stresses, each distorting the balance of life in a different dimension. (Idem, p. 53)

Therefore, it is through shared practices and values based on subsistence and conviviality that it would be possible to create a global movement for the defense of commons that could attempt to dismantle the current abuses of global capitalism led by authoritarian states and private economic organizations. Evidence of the possible success of such a movement lies in the fact that, as reminded by Illich, “commons can exist without police, but resources cannot.” (Illich, 1992, p. 54) Hence, the importance of creating a set of convivial institutions based on spontaneous use instead of profit-seeking. Examples include: telephone link-ups, subway lines, mail routes, public markets and exchanges, which provide services that are utilized “without having to be institutionally convinced that it is to their advantage to do so.” (Illich, 1992, p. 25)

This process is functional to the creation of what Illich defines as a “durable-good economy,” or a social system supported by human interactions and durable goods, in open opposition with modern consumption economy based on planned and perceived obsolescence. A similar change would favor the creation of a society based not anymore upon institutional forms of action and planning, but upon action, direct participation and collaboration, allowing human beings that would inhabit them to be spontaneous, independent and altruist, and on top of that to develop ideologies and technologies that would support a lifestyle in complete harmony with the natural world. (Illich, 1971, p. 29)

In this light, commons are not a set of practices and norms that can coexist with conventional institutional and economic forms such as states and markets, but are a tool for the accomplishment of a convivial society that goes much beyond current economic trends. As far as issues related to the ecological crisis and to energy

usage are concerned, it is not radical ecological idealism that will solve the current issues, but the need to revolutionize human minds to a deeper level. In order to change the world by achieving a low-energy, no-impact society, humanity will have to share the assumption that the world has reached ecological limits and that economic activities in the future will have to take this into account to a deep level. As a consequence, not only will it be necessary for mankind to negotiate with the capabilities of our planet to shelter and give sustenance to all forms of life, but also to shape new values that do not echo old-fashioned and stereotypical political principles. Too, we will need to meditate on our place in this world as an animal species, thus assessing the true essence of humanity. Finally, the convivial system theorized by Ivan Illich will also help us in managing to assess the real role of humans and ultimately of all living beings as a whole, fostering our understanding of the chaotic but beautifully lively realm that we inhabit.

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