Struggling to Live Within the Storm, with Ivan Illich

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In this essay I am trying to show the pertinence of the life and work of Ivan Illich to deal with this moment of danger, at the end of an historical cycle. Illich is a reliable companion for dealing with the current horror and for opening new paths.

As the horror of the Trump era mounts, a new awareness begins to take shape. The mask is off. It becomes increasingly difficult not to see the nature of the dominant regime and the sad condition of the American society. What we always saw, in the so-called Global South, is now perceived by an increasing number of Americans and people in the North. However, this new awareness is not necessarily translated into alternative paths, because we all are trapped in the framework of the ending era. I want to show that Illich knew very well what was behind the veil of that dominant mentality, anticipated the collapse of this society, and also anticipated how the people could and would react.

Hospitality

Illich's immense erudition may explain why he is approached as a great scholar or specialist in very different fields. He is studied as historian, theologian, philosopher, sociologist, medievalist, anthropologist. Sometimes, given the way his ideas are approached, he becomes a kind of academic fetish, an object of cult but someone to leave behind to create a new school of interpretation.

I want to attempt here an alternative hypothesis. I am convinced that the life and work of Ivan were those of a man of action, deeply interested in the transformation of society and profoundly committed to it. I do think that his pertinence for the current dangers has two main sources. The first is his reflection on the nature of the current dangers, his capacity to see under the storm the roots of the evil plaguing us. Ivan illuminates with the proper lanterns what we have before our eyes, but we can't see clearly. The second is his openness to action, the ways he could imagine how to produce the transformation. His radical rejection of diverse forms and temptations of power and the future, his recuperation of the autonomous agency of common people and his drafts and anticipations of the probable shape of social change are very useful when the most severe of our "crises" is the crisis of imagination—we cannot conceive alternatives outside the dominating dominant mentality—that which has become deeply internalized.

In this hypothesis of Ivan as a man of action, cultural pluralism and interculturality occupy a central place—they are simultaneously the heart of the tragic challenge in which we are today and also the character of the option. The argument that this is the main challenge of the XXI century, over those that seem more urgent—those within the economic, social, environmental or political realms—and that to deal with it will open paths for the others, seems to have a very solid foundation. Ivan pioneered a rigourous treatment of all these challenges, in theory and practice. His legacy includes many lessons about them.

A well known episode of his life offers a firm foundation for this hypothesis. As a young man, Ivan had already earned solid prestige within the Vatican, for his brillant studies. When he was offered a position of power which could be a good stair to climb in the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, he instead took a flight to New York. He choose that place for his interest in continuing his studies on Albertus Magnus, whose manuscripts were in Princeton. It was a path to

erudition and research. During his first days in New York, however, in crossing a Puerto Rican neighborhood, he became horrified with the treatment given to the *jibaritos* by his church. He asked Cardinal Spellman which parrish they were attending and began immediately an audacious intercultural crusade. His great success took him soon to the Catholic University of Ponce, in Puerto Rico.

Not long after, Ivan was asked to assume the task of preparing the 40,000 American priests and nuns soon to be sent to Latin America, following an agreement between the Pope and President Kennedy. To critically implement such an endeavor, he created the Center for Intercultural Formation (CIF), in the United States, and later, in Cuernavaca, Mexico, the famous Centro Intercultural de Documentación (CIDOC). Those attending it, for the original purpose, got a superb training in Spanish, but also clear warnings about the colateral damage they would produce, since their missionary work would be in reality at the service of a colonizing enterprise.[1]

According to my hypothesis, interculturality was thus at the very center of the transformation that interested Illich. Until his death, he was engaged in an intercultural dialogue and in imagining the assumptions and characteristics of a society constituted on cultural diversity. In New York he abandoned his path to erudition and became a man of action to challenge the monocultural and universalist treatment used in his church, well ahead of the timid openings of Vatican II and freely advancing challenges through his own rupture. Ivan considered that all modern institutions were constructed in the mold of the Catholic Church and applied to all of them his critique.

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[1] It is still used, in study groups, a discourse pronounced by Illich for a group of students that were getting some training to start their summer activity as volunteers in Mexico: *To Hell with Good Intentions.* *https://depts.washington.edu/egonline/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/Illich-Reading.pdf* (Accessed 07/15/2017).

I would like to underline the immense courage Illich possessed, in the double sense of the term. He kept, to the end of his life, a profound indignation that he often expressed against behavior and attitudes deeply offending him, which he observed even in good people close to him. And he required immense courage to challenge the powerful structures of his church, which he always loved, as well as both the dominant mentality and all social and political structures. He dared to systematically demolish a wide variety of sacred cows, causing many problems for himself. He applied his courageous and valiant attitude both to resist, when he opposed all kinds of horrors, and to contribute to the construction of a new world in the womb of the old.

With his own practice, he suggested a change in the way to change, restablishing the sense of celebration, friendship, hope and surprise. And he gave a new meaning to *hospitality*, both in theory and practice, through great theoretical and historical elaboration on the idea and particularly through a systematic practice of magnificent hospitality.

In *Hospitality and Pain* (1987), one of his best and most mysterious essays, Ivan explores a phenomenon "which I consider constitutive of the West, of that West which has shaped me, body and soul, flesh and blood." (p.1) Fully aware of his Westerness, he attempted to escape from that condition. At one point he even considered the possibility of spending the rest of his life in a Chinese village, a radical departure from his context; acknowledging that he would still be the Westerner Illich in such a village, he opted for an historical exploration to discover the origin of his Western certainties, to better explain and to criticize them.

In the essay, Ivan considered that the central reality of the West could be expressed in the old Latin phrase: *Corruptio optimi quae est pessima*, the corruption of the best is the worst. He thus explores the history of hospitality and its corruption, when the tools of the church or the state "have created a new reality which the individual must be conformed with to find him or herself."

This "unique embodiment of the self …emerges only in western cultures." Ivan explains what the historian documents, a faith which "led to the hospitalization of mercy and to professional care… to medicalization and ever more subtle forms of torture… to the 'human' condition today in which all technologies became so invasive that only in something I would call techno-fast can joy be pursued." (p.19)

Ivan knew very well and was horrified with the fact that the majority of people on Earth had been always excluded, marginalized and Westernized: they were "barbarians," *ba-ba-roi,* for the Greek, because they could not speak a Greek tongue; they were "pagans" or "infidels" for Christian Europe, in need of evangelization; they were "savages" during the Enlightenment, in need of civilization; they were "natives" or "heathen" for Industrial Europe, in need of education in the needs of the market; they were "underdeveloped" for the hegemonic United States after World War II. For this qualification-disqualification, they were colonized and exposed to both genocide and culturicide. What we have today, once the racism and sexism inherent to the dominant regime becomes increasingly evident, is one of the most oppressive forms of discrimination, particularly applied to migrants, which are at one of the highest numbers in history. The "Yugoslavian Syndrome," when people that were neighbors and even friends for centuries begin to kill each other for "cultural" reasons, is now spreading.

Through hospitality, the hospitality he practised with his friends but also with strangers during his days of open house in State College (Pennsylvania) or Bremen (Germany), Ivan clearly trespassed his Western cultural boundaries and applied what he learned from other cultures. He experienced with them a kind of hospitality not yet corrupted, a hospitality that was an act of love extended to both your own people and to strangers, an idea and practice that he often evoked through the parable of the Good Samaritan: love, compassion, as the motivation to trespass your

cultural boundaries. Ivan accepted with sympathy the Zapatista proposal of constructing a world in which many worlds can be embraced, as the appropriate substitute for the colonial Western obsession of constructing "One World" with any banner as the pretext: the Cross, Civilization, Democracy, Human Rights, Development, etc.

The Moment of Danger

The outcome of the American elections in 2016 surprised everyone. For many people something had radically changed. This is perhaps what should be noted in the first place: that what was there for a long time took many people by surprise. It was a rude awakening for those who were like sleepwalkers suddenly discovering that the nightmare was not in their dreams but in reality.

I want to examine five aspects of the current situation, to explore the pertinence of Illich's approach as a way to live, with him, within the storm.

1. A major crisis of societal functioning

All institutions, everywhere, suffer some form of disarray. The educational system does not prepare people for life and work; the health system increasingly sickens people and becomes as expensive as inefficient; the transportation system paralyzes; urban construction makes cities increasingly uninhabitable; police are an increasing source of insecurity; democratic procedures are increasingly tricky and illusory and are at the service of forms of despotism.

In each country and region things are different—in some places a few institutions still operate in a satisfactory way and in some others they have reached a point of counterproductive paralysis. The perception of what is happening is also different: some still conceive and try to

implement reforms of the apparatuses or assume that what is happening is only temporary or circumstantial. Others are beginning to feel anguish as they sense the imminent collapse of institutions they once trusted.

Perhaps the worst of this moment of danger is the profound distrust in the mechanisms to deal with the crisis of societal functioning. The Zapatista Enough! (*Ya Basta!*) of 1994 is still perceived as the detonator of a new awareness. "All of them should go!" proclaimed the Argentinians in 2001. Many episodes of the same sign followed: "My dreams don't fit into your ballot box" said the *Indignados* in Spain; our political regime, suggested Occupy Wall Street, is at the service of the 1%; several countries, like Spain or Belgium, remained without the heads of their formal government for a long period, given the incapacity of constituting it through the established procedures.

The presidential election in the United States became paradigmatic, both because in that country modern democracy was born and became a universal model of operation, and because the collapse of the pillars of the system was very visible and followed attentively all over the world. The apparatuses of the American political regime are still there, but what gave them life and sustenance vanished. What was assumed to be a democratic society required that the majority of the population believed that the electoral procedure was a reliable tool to express the collective will, while also trusting elected officials, as representatives of the interests and desires of the majority. Very few people still have such belief and trust. Four-fifths of Americans found the campaigns nauseating and the outcome took almost everyone by surprise. It was reported, for example, that many Trump followers were ready to go to the streets on November 9th, many of them with weapons, to oppose an outcome they were assuming would be adverse.

It is increasingly evident that the democratic regime itself is a despotic and tricky tool, inherently racist and sexist. We need to remember that both Greece, where democracy was conceived for the first time, and the United States, where it took its modern shape and became a universal model, were societies with slaves, deeply racist and sexist. These traits are embedded in the basic design of a democratic nation-state.

It is possible to identify a severe crisis in every area of daily life: crisis of employment—with more unemployed in the world than ever and an increasing number of people in the so-called informal sector; the worst food crisis in history, with a billion people going to bed every night with an empty stomach and millions dying of forms of famine not seen since the Middle Ages—today, wrote Eduardo Galeano, the Uruguayan poet, who is not afraid of hunger, is afraid of eating; an educational crisis—more than half of children entering the first grade will not be able to reach the level that in their countries is considered compulsory education, and those going to the end in the educational ladder cannot find a job within the field they studied; a health crisis—an increasingly expensive, inefficient and counterproductive health system, public health budgets limited and an increasing number of people deprived of access to basic health support; crisis in transportation—when speed paralyzes and the planet can no longer take the environmental consequences of the system of transportation; crisis in settling—with more homeless people than ever, massive displacement and the highest rate of migration in history. The list is interminable. The sphere of the "environment" is perhaps the area in which the crisis in societal functioning is more widely recognized, given the conditions of climate change and the lack of effective measures to deal with it.

Any crisis has a solution. But the current social malfunctioning does not seem to have one. Reformers proliferate as a plague, in every institution and for all political and social procedures,

and desperate efforts are being made to create the impression that everything remains the same and that a few changes and adjustments would be enough to address the current difficulties. However, the conviction that there is no remedy, within the frame producing and reproducing them, is spreading. People talk now, with solid arguments, of a kind of collapse. It is acknowledged that we are at the end of an historical period and there is intense debate about the candidates considered "corpses"—what is it that is ending? The debate focuses on those requiring burial for a long time, such as "development," "progress," "neoliberalism" and the system of formal representation, as well as newer possibilities which until recently were taboo to condemn, like "capitalism," "modernity" and "patriarchy."

2. Rapid crystallization of social classes and other conflict groups

The disarray of class organizations characteristic of recent decades, when those consolidated during the postwar period weakened or vanished, has taken a fascinating turn. Disperse groups come together with amazing speed and their mobilizations immediately attract all kinds of alliances, some clearly unexpected. In almost every country, in the course of the XXI century, it is possible to observe a kind of mobilization with few precedents, taking very diverse shapes. There is now a discussion about "place" politics, when some specific places—like in Egypt, Greece and the U.S.—became a point of reference for complex mobilizations and movements.

Other social constructions are becoming increasingly relevant, some with immediate effect in generalized change. In the United States, grassroots organizations advanced slowly, in small groups, for many years, and then, suddenly, undocumented workers organized one of the biggest and more extended mobilizations in the history of this country. Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives

Matter, Ferguson, Standing Rock, Parkland and other names are already a reference point for new forms of mobilization, which expressed themselves in different ways during the electoral campaign and represented a kind of explosion after November 8th. Everywhere, very diverse groups, which usually stayed separated or ignored each other, are in movement, crystalizing quickly.

3. The rise of organizations and ideologies offering an alternative outlook and leadership

New theoretical and ideological proposals are now proliferating around the world; they analyze what is happening with different approaches and offer perspectives outside conventional frameworks. With them also emerge organizations and leaders which attempt to incarnate those proposals. In some cases, the idea is to return to the shape of an idealized past, like in the case of Nazi and neo-Nazi groups and many kinds of fundamentalists: Islamic, white supremacists, etc. In other cases, the idea is to renovate old beliefs or militancy, to adjust them to contemporary conditions. Groups with new proposals, in content or form, represent the larger number. Some are the outcome of new technologies, to promote virtual associations or to transform them into new forms of social organization. Next to those within the conventional framework, from the past or the present, those representing new options are multiplying. It is impossible, for the time being, to produce a solid classification of all these initiatives, which emerge from the most diverse motives: they can be spiritual, religious, Marxist, anticommunists, anarchist, authoritarian et al.

4. A crisis of the governing elite, of the dominant class(es) and of the state apparatus

The intensity and magnitude of this crisis is varied. In some countries, there is the appearance of stability and the crisis of the elite is not public. Increasingly, however, this crisis is

expressed in a spectacular way, in small countries, like Iceland or Slovenia, middle size countries, like Spain or England, or in very big countries, like Brazil and the United States. It is useful to compare the current situation with others in the recent past. In the 1970s, for example, before the disarray and decomposition provoked by the cultural revolution of the 1960s, which tended to provoke substantive changes at a global scale, the Trilateral Commission was created, unifying the dominant classes and defeating the popular movements, thus establishing the neoliberal era and the globalizing project. Today, the decomposition of the dominant classes is entirely evident in some countries, like Brazil; the attempts to remedy it through non-conventional procedures only produce short-term adjustments; and in many cases, like in the United States, the disarray opens a period of great uncertainty, because neither the people nor the dominant classes have the analytical and political tools to deal with it. Nothing like the Trilateral Commission exists today and apparently it is currently impossible to create an equivalent.

5. A linked "moral crisis," placing in doubt the morally accepted structures of authority, of ideological hegemony and of common sense

This crisis is probably the most evident. In countries like Mexico, such "moral crisis" is an old one; having evolved in recent years, with many governors in jail and corruption scandals affecting the president, while consolidating within public opinion what everybody knew many years earlier. Something similar is happening in other countries, but in them, like in the United States, what emerges is something unexpected because it was carefully hidden from common perception. Many reactions after November 8th, for example, clearly indicate the measure in which there was an extended denial of the very nature of the American society—its racism and sexism, for example—and the chasm between the real behavior of the leaders and their supposed

accepted values, as the #MeToo campaign clearly illustrates. Everywhere, however, the moral

decay of those in public office is increasingly acknowledged; the exceptions only confirm the

rule.

Ivan clearly anticipated both this picture, the collapse of the dominant institutions, and

people's reactions. One can read full sections of his Cuernavaca "pamphlets," as he called them,

published in the early 1970s, precise descriptions of the current situation. In *Tools for*

Conviviality (1973, 103), for example, he wrote the following:

> *Almost overnight people will lose confidence not only in the major institutions but also in the miracle prescriptions of the would-be crisis managers.… Some fortuitous coincidence will render publicly obvious the structural contradictions between stated purposes and effective results in our major institutions.…Large institutions may suddenly lose their respectability, their legitimacy, and their reputation of serving the public good. It happened to the Roman Church in the Reformation, to Royalty in the Revolution. The unthinkable became obvious overnight: that people could and would behead their rulers.*

To read Ivan's words again, or for the first time, throws desperately needed light on what

is happening today, both to better understand it and to react in the proper way.

What Is to be Done?

Ivan had always been aware of this old question posed by Lenin in a famous book. I

suspect that Lenin's answer and particularly the application of his ideas worried him so much that

he dedicated a great amount of time and reflection to conceive an alternative.

The XX century can be called the Leninist century. Lenin postulates—both in his 1905

pamphlet, *What is to be done?,* and in *The State and Revolution* (written between February and

August 1917) and which became a fundamental reference for many revolutionary groups, their

Holy Scriptures—political initiatives and styles of leadership for movements, revolutions and

governments of the whole ideological spectrum in the XX century. It seems that nobody escaped

this mark. Steve Bannon, Trump's former senior advisor, openly affiliated with the extreme right, declaring himself in 2016 to be a Leninist. Most revolutionary groups, until very recently, were defined as Marxist-Leninist.

To be clear, understanding this historical moment is a very complex matter, full of subtle edges. How to draw a clear line, for example, to radically differentiate Ivan's argument for disestablishing the school system and all modern institutions, and Bannon's reaction: "Lenin wanted to destroy the state and that's my goal too; I want to bring everything crashing down and destroy all of today's establishment"? Are the charter schools and the different forms of privatizing public resources for education equivalent to Ivan's proposal to "deschooling society"? In what follows, I select a few aspects, which in my view are particularly pertinent for underscoring the current relevance of Ivan.

Personal agency

Ivan knew that after the XII century we began to be constructed as "individuals," in the mold of the text invented at the end of that century. He knew, however, that we were not individuals, but persons, knots in nets of embodied relationships. Ivan resisted the organization of collectives of individuals and even more of masses. He was horrified by the constitution of mass societies and mass media.

From the XII century on, the dominant trend among those interested in promoting social transformation has been the formation of mass organizations, mass movements, massive groupings of individuals. This social transformation motif requires the constitution of a vanguard capable of organizing and leading those masses—a vanguard usually lead by a single leader. In *What Is To Be Done?* Lenin established that the keys for action include: superior knowledge,

authoritarian instruction and social engineering. The revolutionary "professionals" should behave as teachers in the schools, commanders in the revolutionary army or foremen in a factory. According to Lenin,

> Without a dozen tested and talented leaders (and talented men are not born in the hundreds), professionally trained, schooled by a long experience and working together in perfect harmony, no class in the modern society could lead a crucial struggle. (Lenin 1902).

We know well what this has meant. Ivan continually confronted such notions. One of his most notable contributions is his capacity for promoting personal agency within those knots in nets of relations that we are. We don't need to wait for the "great leader" or the big organization to start our agitation for transformation. And, we will not start as individuals!

In thinking about personal agency, with Ivan, I can associate it immediately with what has been called "joyful militancy," in opposition to "sad militancy." In both, we experience joys and sorrows, but in the first you avoid the dogmatism, the close-mindedness, the subordination (to leaders and ideas) of the second, and emphasize the joy of a common commitment with others. (Montgomery and Bergman, 2017).

Coalitions

> Ivan resisted the creation and operation of parties and formal democracy. He wrote:

> Just as General Vo Nguyen Giap could use the U.S. military machine to win his war, so the multinational corporations and professions can now use the law and the two party system to establish their empire. But while democracy in the United States can survive a victory by Giap, it cannot survive one by ITT and its like. As total crisis approaches, it becomes more obvious that the nation-state has grown into the holding corporation for a multiplicity of self-serving tools, and the political party into an instrument to organize stockholders for the occasional election of boards and presidents. (1973, 108-9)

Ivan anticipated, 50 years ago, what today is entirely evident: how democracy collapses when corporations take control. You cannot put your hopes in any party before the kind of crisis we are suffering today.

Before the loss of legitimacy of the State and the parties, Ivan considered that it was necessary to coalesce discontents, which can be discontented for the most diverse motives, without trying to unify them around an ideology, a doctrine or some promised land. The idea is to coordinate efforts to resist what is happening, dismantle public and private oppressive apparatuses and begin the construction of new worlds that will emerge in the process. A new kind of politics, of "One 'No' and Many 'Yeses'," is emerging everywhere, substituting the binary principle implying one "Yes," for every "No."

Beyond the state

The proletariat needs the power of the State, wrote Lenin in *The State and Revolution.* It needs "the centralized organization of force, the organization of violence to lead the great mass of population." (1901) The nation-state was born with capitalism and became its political form. In the nation-state, the monopoly of legitimate violence is given to the State. It is a regime based on such violence, to impose on everyone the will of capital. The State creates and administers markets, supposedly free. President Reagan and Ms. Thatcher used continually the anti-state discourse, while they widened to unprecedented scale the size and functions of that State. And here I am using the conventional word, "State," which in fact designates a linguistic ghost. I am alluding to state apparatuses, to the governments, which are nothing more than administrators at the service of capital, not the "State" or the "nation," which are useful terms to understanding control and domination, but that have no real existence. Both Trump and Bannon are basically

implementing the agenda of the Republican Party before the State. They are trying to dismantle whatever remains of the so-called Welfare State, of the concessions given to the workers through the New Deal, while increasing the faculties of both the police and the military while openly supporting all kinds of violence. The administration not only seeks to intensify the 76 wars currently waged by the US and to strengthen its 800 military bases in more than 80 foreign countries, with troops and other military personnel in about 160 foreign countries and territories. (Street 2018). It also intends to widen the range of power and impunity of the police, in the US, the violence against people of color and migrants, while transforming the schools into battlefields, by arming teachers, as president Trump suggested on February 20th, 2018 after the Parkland killings. The US has today 40% of the world's military spending and more citizens have more weapons than in any other country. What Bannon and the other "Leninists" want is not to destroy all the state apparatuses, which are basically at the service of capital, but to dismantle what remains in them to regulate the operation of capital and to provide some services and subsidies to the people. Lenin wanted to destroy the Tsarist state, only to establish the "dictatorship of the proletariat" with the Stalinist state.

Instead of suggesting seizure of state power, as proposed by revolutionaries of all shapes and colors, Ivan insisted on the need to dismantle those state apparatuses and dedicated a good part of his work to show how it is possible to do it. But it is important to underline that he gave clear priority, before that, to the public ownership of the means of production, to the social control of mechanisms of distribution and to the communal agreement on self-limitation of some technological dimensions (Borremans and Illich 1971). He was explicitly opposing a kind of crypto-Stalinism, putting the means of production and the systems of distribution in the hands of experts and bureaucracies. He was instead reclaiming for the people full autonomy and freedom.

In an interview in the late 1980s, after Ivan explained that his roots are in natural law, as expressed in the behavior of ordinary people in small communities, and mentioning his friendship with Paul Goodman and how much he influenced him, Douglas Lummis asked Ivan: "Labeling is always risky, but would you accept the term 'anarchist,' as a general characterization of your work?" Ivan answered immediately, with a clear statement:

> Definitely…I would want to be known as an anarchist. But let me illustrate what I mean by anarchism. By hearing just one story, you should be able to grasp how much Paul was both an anarchist and an adherent of natural law. What I tell you happened in 1967 or 1968, at the height of the student movement and the New Left. A group of first-rate rabble-rousers and courageous intellectuals was assembled in Cuernavaca at our center. Paul gave a series of lectures on the law. At one point a young man interrupted him, in that manner which was not uncommon then, stood up and attacked this 'old, gay, dirty-minded phony,' because Paul was defending the dignity of the law. I saw Paul crying. When he had finally fought out of his tears, he said, 'You are not enough of an anarchist to understand the dignity of the law.'

Ivan wrote the final version of *Tools for Conviviality* for an audience of Canadian lawyers and constructed his argument for political inversion around the principles of the law. At the very end he wrote:

> The structures of political and legal procedures are integral to one another. Both shape and express the structure of freedom in history. If this is recognized, the framework of due procedure can be used as the most dramatic, symbolic, and convivial tool in the political area. The appeal to law remains powerful even where society makes access to legal machinery a privilege, or where it systematically denies justice, or where it cloaks despotism in the mantle of show tribunals. Even when he who upholds the formal structure of ordinary language and procedure earns the scorn, ridicule and persecution of his fellow revolutionaries, the appeal of an individual to the formal structure embedded in a people's history remains the most powerful instrument to say the truth and denounce the cancerous domination of the industrial dominance over production as the ultimate form of idolatry. I feel almost unbearable anguish when faced by the fact that only the word recovered from history should be left to us as the power for stemming disaster. Yet only the word in its weakness can associate the majority of the people in the revolutionary inversion of inevitable violence into convivial reconstruction. (1973, 109-10)

When Ivan alludes to the structure of freedom, he is explicitly describing the juxtaposition of political and legal procedures—norms autonomously formulated and enacted by the people themselves, according with their local traditions, for the convivial reconstruction.

Ivan clearly drew a line of separation with traditional individualist anarchism, which in the United States takes the shape of right libertarians and constitutes some of the most dangerous and violent groups within the violent American society. Ivan affirmed himself in natural law, according to which we would regulate ourselves after the knowledge of who we are, not individuals, but as knots in nets of relations. And he argues that such natural law, which some see expressed in the "State" as positive law, in fact is expressed in the ordinary behavior of people and in small communities, as mentioned before.

I believe that Ivan would subscribe without reservation to the Zapatista communiqués and the style of government they have adopted, at the grassroots, through radical democracy. He would endorse with enthusiasm, I think, the 2017 proposal of the National Indian Congress of Mexico, for that kind of democracy, challenging at the same time formal democracy, political parties, capitalism and patriarchy.

A Revolution?

Teodor Shanin is one of the best scholars on theories of revolution. The titles of the sub-sections I used to describe the present situation in the first section of this essay are taken from his description of a *revolutionary situation*. Based in solid theoretical and historical documentation, he describes it as

> the combination and interdependence of (i) a major crisis of societal functioning, often brought about by war or severe economic depression; (ii) rapid crystallization of social classes and other conflict groups; (iii) the rise of organizations and ideologies offering an alternative outlook and leadership; (iv) a crisis of the governing elite, of the dominant

class(es) and of the state apparatus, and (v) a linked 'moral crisis,' placing in doubt the morally accepted structures of authority, of ideological hegemony and of common sense. (1986, 6)

He adds that all these conditions should appear within "an international context which facilitates or at least permits the revolutionary processes to take place," a context like the current context.

When a society enters into a revolutionary situation and nothing happens or a revolution fails before fulfilling its purpose, a severe and accelerated social decomposition occurs, a profound process of decay, until the revolution emerges or the society ceases to exist as such, being absorbed by some other or becoming totally fragmented. Perhaps the best example of this process is the Russian revolution of 1905-07, whose frustration produced the social and political decomposition that precipitated the revolution of 1917.

For Shanin, a revolution is born from profound changes in the perceptions of the would-be "revolutionaries," when isolated persons or small groups begin to perceive the exhaustion of previous forms of social existence. This awakening generates situations and periods of what has been called "multiple sovereignty," when different groups, in different spaces of the society, begin to behave and to govern themselves with norms and ideas in open contrast with the dominant rules. They are not necessarily challenging and confronting the established regime…until the moment comes when the "revolutionaries" are part of a massive popular intervention, an uprising from below, which openly confronts the "forces of order" marshaled by those governing. When this happens, the revolution represents a substantial change in social structure involving fundamental systems of domination and all social relations. There are changes in reality and in the general perception; a conscience of transformation and a transformation of conscience, even if not realistic, are necessary components of the social change that can be

considered revolutionary. Sooner than later, in this process, those governing are removed from power and the main system of domination, as well as ownership relations and class divisions, suffer profound transformations.

We have been for a long time in a revolutionary situation, but it has not been translated into a revolution, that is, it has not generated as yet a substantial change in social structure. The moment of danger is defined by the fact that, given all those conditions, a profound and extended political rebellion has been emerging, which in the case of the United States became evident with the elections, but such rebellion may advance in opposite directions: its destiny is not written in the stars or predetermined. It can be a path to catastrophe or to emancipation, it can consolidate a very authoritarian and violent fascist regime, in which the migrants would be the new "Jews," or it can create an unprecedented opportunity for real freedom. That it generates a liberating outcome depends of the character of people's mobilizations, if instead of protecting the status quo or sharpening its worst components they are committed to the desired change.

Before characterizing with more precision the current situation, we need to consider that in the XXI century a revolution following the previous patterns is virtually impossible. The experience of the elites, threatened by revolutionary attempts or displaced by revolutions of different kinds, as well as the changes in the technology of domination and control, make highly improbable that a revolution in the old style could succeed. The Bastille, the Winter Palace, or even the triumphant entrance of Fidel in La Havana are no longer real options. Furthermore, we need to take into consideration that for many actual or potential "revolutionaries" the previous revolutions could not produce the effects they were looking for, even in the cases in which they generated fundamental changes in the systems of domination and social relations, having removed those in government. For many, for example, the revolutions that established "real socialism" in

several countries, produced substantial changes in the property relations, in class divisions while resulting in many positive changes for many people, while failing to achieve fully their purposes. Instead of socialism they established a variant of state capitalism, one which was extremely authoritarian, having produced many deaths and great suffering and sacrifice for the majority of the population. Observing the final impact of those revolutions in some societies, it has been said that "real socialism" was only the longest and more inefficient and cruel path to establish capitalism.

Most revolutions in the last centuries attempted to "seize the power," usually expressed as the attempt to "conquer" the government and occupy the state apparatuses to realize the purposes of the revolutionaries. Different tools and ways were used: armed uprising, supported by people's massive intervention (China, Cuba, México…); sudden attack or coup d'etat, which usually consisted in a realignment of forces within the elite (many countries and cases in Latin America) or which became a real revolution, removing members of the elite to reorient the society [Egypt (Nasser); Venezuela (Chávez); and even the electoral path (Chile (Allende))]. In recent years there have been revolutionary processes similar to those in the past, but at the end, after removing some governments without generating important social changes, have become failed or incomplete (Arab spring).

It is commonplace to point out that we live in *mass* societies. We have *mass* media and both the states and the churches deal with salvation and education of the *masses*. True, capitalism has a homogenizing effect on the individuals it constitutes and, in that sense, it produces *masses* of consumers, spectators, workers, voters, etc. Seemingly, all revolutions are produced by *masses*. However, closer observation allows one to draw a line between two very different kinds of events: *mass* mobilizations, organized by politicians, leaders or political parties, using different

tools (charisma, coercion, militancy, ideology, belief, etc.), while mostly expressing the prevalent state of affairs and which is reaffirmed or consolidated through the mobilization; and popular initiatives in a revolutionary context that can be expressed in a *massive* intervention. In the second, the participants are not usually organized as *masses* and it is only the numerical aggregation of individuals, collectives and organizations, coming together for very different reasons and motives, which produces the *massive* condition.

Machado observes that the word *mass* applied to man, of ecclesiastic and bourgeois origin, implicitly conveys an unbearable degradation of the human condition. He warns that the concept, merely quantitative, can be applied to crowds of people as to anything occupying a place in a space. Yet, in so doing, a reduction, an abstraction is made of all qualities of humans, with the exception of what they share with all material things: that of being able to be measured in relation with a unit of volume. And thus, in strict logic, "human masses cannot be the object of salvation or education. In contrast, it is always possible to shoot against them." (Machado, 1975, 239-40) *Masses* don't buy, vote or mobilize. Real men and women, who buy, vote or mobilize, are reduced to *masses* through an atrocious procedure degrading their real condition.

Political traditions of the XX century, usually Leninist traditions, have systematically attempted to create *masses,* imitating the commercial practices of the corporations, which look for *masses* of consumers for their products. Contemporary electronic technologies can currently process individual characteristics, classifying preferences and behaviors; the products are sold to both corporations and political parties, to organize the promotion of products or votes. Neither in the past nor recently has this been the way in which revolutions have been produced. Rather, all started when specific persons practiced a radical rupture with the state of affairs, for sheer survival or for other reasons. If their action succeeds, it spread through contagion until it

configured extended patterns, in specific regions or spaces, creating the conditions of "multiple sovereignty" characteristic of revolutionary processes finally becoming a *massive* intervention. In general, when a revolution is still revolutionary, the revolutionaries organize themselves in councils, both to govern themselves during the process and to coordinate ideas and actions with others. That is what Hannah Arendt found when she studied one hundred years of revolutions in different parts of the world: a natural form of organization of the revolutionaries. (Arendt 1963) When some leaders or parties succeed in taking control of the revolutionary processes, to carry out their own plans, they are forced to get rid of those councils and subsume them into discourses, institutions, laws and apparatuses to better control people and political processes.

A careful and close observation of revolutionary processes reveals that the point of departure are *revolutionary acts,* realized by persons or collectives, which detonate those processes. It is well known that the first bourgeoisie and proletarians died without knowing who they were: they had already created the new regime, the social relations defining them, but their mentality was still trapped in the feudal world. Capitalism had already been birthed. But they could not see themselves as bourgeois or as proletarians, as the owners of the means of production and the owners of their labor force, because they were still perceiving their own position in the society and their relations with the power structures in existing terms. Very few discovered that their *revolutionary acts* finally produced the dissolution of their world. That is why it is so important to characterize those acts, to discover the moment in which a revolutionary process has already started.

> I call an act 'revolutionary' only when its appearance within a culture establishes irrevocably a (significantly) new possibility: a trespass of cultural boundaries which beats a new path. A revolutionary act is the unexpected proof of a new social fact, which might have been foretold, expected, or even called for but never before irrevocably shown as possible. (1970, 1)

For Illich, "extraordinary" facts are real, but they don't establish a pattern of new relations. Their repetition will not modify existing relations. Weird or supernatural facts don't reorient the patterns of behavior in a culture. Criminal acts may remain unpunished, but no one claims their legitimacy, which is precisely what revolutionaries do with their acts. The society commits to the madhouse, the convent or jail those committing acts classified as "mad," "supernatural" or "aggressive," often applying the same treatment to revolutionaries in order to prevent the revolution.

Actions become properly revolutionary when the extraordinary character of their rupture or the limits of a culture become relevant for ordinary reality and are assumed inside it. Those becoming transcendent, those that are authentically an expression of a revolution, are those in which the transgression is irreversible, spread through contagion to other spheres of reality and are intentional. Revolutions can thus be planned.

Are we seeing, around us, "revolutionary acts"? Or it is only more or less of the same? Or should we, finally, abandon the very idea of a revolution, a very contaminated word, and instead listen to ordinary men and women who only want to resist and to survive…and then, with that strong motivation, are committing every day all kinds of cultural transgressions that become contagious and thus create a new world, a new era?

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We are living in times of confusion. Our lenses, the concepts, categories and hypotheses we have used, are becoming opaque. Given the real or apparent novelty of what is happening, we cannot avoid confusion.

The worst of our crisis, however, is the crisis of imagination. For many years, for centuries, we have been thinking and behaving according to a mental framework that is no longer useful. As Einstein said too well, no problem has a solution within the framework creating it. And we don't have alternative frameworks. We need to invent a new one. Ivan is an amazing ally for such a task. He refused to give an itinerary, a path, even a draft of what we could do. But he practiced amazing openings of thinking and action that, as he suggested, may allow us to recover a contemporary art of living, what we badly need.

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