

Ivan Illich, Thresholds, and the Climate Commons

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In this essay, I propose to explore how Ivan Illich, a Catholic priest, social historian and cultural critic, from the 1950s through the 1990s, investigated the rich history of needs and its relationship to industrially constructed desires. The questions I seek to understand are the following: How does the history of needs relate to climate commons? What are the multiple ways in which the issue of climate is related to the commons? How do we parse the problem of the climate, both in understanding it and in responsibly responding to it? (Ghosh 2016, Hawken 2017).¹

I knew Ivan Illich for over twenty years, from 1982 to 2002 (Nagarajan 2003). He was an iconoclast, a fiery, controversial intellectual, a historian of ideas, and an outspoken social critic of our most treasured certainties. From the early 1950s until he passed away in late 2002, Ivan Illich had firmly and insistently woven together fields of religion, sociology, technology, ethics, equity, ecology, commons and economics, a feat rarely done then or now. He is not as

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well-known today as he was fifty years ago; nevertheless, I think it is important to bring his ideas more to the fore, as I believe they can be useful and helpful in our muddling through our present predicament.

Ivan Illich and the History of Needs

Ivan Illich (1926-2002) was born in Vienna, Austria to a Catholic father from the Dalmatian Islands in Croatia and a Jewish mother who came from a converted Catholic family, originally from Germany. In the spring of 1984, he related to me the terrors he felt when Nazism arose and took over his worlds in Vienna when he was a teenager from the 1930s to the early 1940s.² He described in an anguished voice, decades after it had happened, the force with which he was humiliated in elementary and middle school because of his Jewishness and the terrors of that time. As a teenager, in the early 1940s, during the height of the takeover of Austria by Germany, he helped his family---his mother and his younger twin brothers---escape Vienna, Austria to Florence, Italy. Once he finished his high school in Florence, he trained intensively at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome in theology and felt the intellectual force of another Catholic priest, Jacques Maritain. Illich subsequently received a Ph.D. in history at the University of Salzburg after WWII. Throughout Illich's life, he actively linked the worlds of the spirit and the material in unique and distinguished ways.

There were three phases to his adult life which were not distinct and separate but rather overlapped with each other. From 1951 to 1968, he moved in the world primarily as a Catholic priest. He worked with a Puerto Rican community in Harlem in the 1950s. He became fascinated by the ways in which they had come to Catholicism with their own unique cultural gifts. He

² Personal Conversation, Spring 1984, Pitzer College, Claremont Colleges.

organized one of the biggest Puerto Rican-American Catholic festivals on the Fordham University campus. Subsequently, he became the Vice Rector at the University of Puerto Rico in Puerto Rico. Then, he moved to Cuernavaca, Mexico and started an organization called the Center for Intercultural Formation (CIF) in 1961 which later merged into another organization called CIDOC (Centre for Intercultural Documentation). CIDOC was a Spanish language training center for those in the United States who wanted to learn Spanish. Simultaneously, it was a center that ran seminars and courses on the sustainability of contemporary institutions, the ideas behind western civilization and the unrecognized strength and vitality in traditional, vernacular cultures. For nearly its entire existence, CIDOC became very famous and attracted students from all over the world. CIDOC lasted until 1976.

Ivan Illich, during this heyday as an activist Catholic priest working for the Church in Mexico, was in an uneasy relationship with the Church at times, as he was outspoken about the western solipsism sometimes embedded within the thinking and acting of the Church when approaching work in the “third world.”³ He did not see the southern countries as “underdeveloped or third world” or as the sole criterion to see people from those lands. He believed in the dignity and spirit of people who had not yet become industrialized and he constantly advocated a third way for those not yet under the spell of the necessity of the industrial complex.

The second phase of Illich’s life involved giving public lectures on what he was thinking about and the writings which emerged from these popular lectures. Illich became a prolific writer during the last decade of CIDOC. His first essay “The Seamy Side of Charity” was published in the Jesuit magazine, *America*, in 1967 on January 21, 1967. It was one of the earliest essays

³ Personal Conversation, Spring 1984, Pitzer College, Claremont Colleges.

criticizing the implicit American cultural hegemony at the root of the “desire to help the third world.” It is not that Illich advocated to not help those countries outside of the modern-industrial fold, but rather that he believed that we needed to actively recognize that the act of “helping” itself was deeply problematic to begin with, given the different cultural and economic locations of those of us coming from the United States. He believed one needed to be very careful and aware that one’s good intentions may very well cause more harm than good and that our own deep American imperialism may be invisible to ourselves. This essay is now regarded as such a classic that it has become required reading in many different fields.

His subsequent collections of essays included *The Celebration of Awareness: A Call for Institutional Revolution* (1970), *De-schooling Society* (1970), *Medical Nemesis: The Expropriation of Health*, *Tools for Conviviality* (1973), and *Energy and Equity* (1974). These controversial books were sharp, incisive and devastating critiques of key aspects of industrial civilization, especially in the fields of education, medicine, health, technology and energy.

He thought in the 1960s and 1970s, like Gandhi, fifty years before, that if everyone in the world consumed at the rate of the western world, it would not be sustainable. Gandhi had said, in the newspaper he edited, *Young India*, in 1928, “God forbid that India should ever take to industrialism after the manner of the West. If an entire nation of 300 million took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts.” Instead, Illich advocated for everyone, both in the west and in the south, to rethink the assumptions of the ill thought out industrialized path that seemed nearly messianic in the 1950s and 1960s. He labelled the unquestioned industrialized path as the “idol” moderns worship without thinking. He was not against modernity, as many have misunderstood him. He was for a kind of critical modernity, a modernity which we question even as we enter each new unfolding, that we keep everyone in

view when we evaluate each new technology and we keep a sharp eye on its invisible assumptions and hegemonies. He was afraid of the implicit “goodness” we believed lay in modernity. He argued again and again that we were proselytizers of a new way of life, without knowing or realizing the rich values and assumptions of other ways of life we were destroying and moreover how much these other cultural ways could teach us where we were, in fact, blind and deaf.

Next, in his third life phase he began his sharp turn in writing towards history. He moved away from current issues and looked for the sources of our cultural assumptions in historical texts, archives, and other materials. He tried to understand where we had come from, how the very modern assumptions we lived became naturalized into unspoken and hidden (even to ourselves) certainties. For example, in *Towards a History of Needs* (1978), he turned towards understanding the deeper history of our cultural assumptions of actual needs and constructed needs; he traced the conversion of artificially induced desires into culturally necessary needs served by excessive consumption. How did a car become the definition of transportation? He argued consistently for a society organized around the speed of the bicycle, rather than the car. In the phenomenal book, *H2O and the Waters of Forgetfulness* (1985), he presented a history of the sacredness of water in the west, from ancient Roman fountains to the representations of water in paintings in the 19th century. He set out a more nuanced understanding of the history of smells, the toilet and industrial sewage systems. It is a brilliant book, bringing together the history of the toilet and the parallels between the ways in which cities developed their water systems and how we came to understand the fluid runways inside our own bodies. How did sewage and waste get to be seen in the ways that they were?

During the 1980s, Illich became a historian of ideas. I met him in 1982 in Berkeley when he taught a course on Gender based on his book of the same name. I did not think his notions of gender were as well thought as they could have been. This book was built on history of feminist thought, but it strangely undercut them, as he bluntly battled feminism and women's increasing power as another aspect of the modern. In this argument, I could not follow him and my arguments with not just what he was saying but also the certainty with which he was saying it provoked me into intense discussions within the Illich circle of friends that Illich had come to Berkeley with. And yet, through these conversations with some of the key interlocutors, I also came to remember my paternal grandmother and the stories of my dead maternal grandmother, who were powerful in their families and households and ran them with an iron hand, with power to the point that my grandparents, father, and uncles were full of respect, awe and subservience in their presence. I had seen their gendered worlds and lived in them for months and years at a time. Sometimes I got a glimpse of Illich's perspectives of gendered worlds, of bypassing the modern lens through which we usually look at the past as incomplete or a shadow of modernity. It sometimes made sense.

Throughout the 1980s, he tried to articulate a unique perception of our industrial civilization from the view of the 12th-13th century in Europe. He wanted to know how we got to this point. How did we come to believe the ideas we as a culture hold close to our hearts? He was engaged in unpacking the deep assumptions with which we all live in the world, which we are mostly unaware of. He lectured widely in the 1980s and 1990s. He moved amongst three places: Cuernavaca, Mexico; Penn State University, State College, PA; and Bremen, Germany.

He questioned the central assumptions of the industrialized west. He battled the rigidification of the industrialization of our certainties in these times. He argued that we as a

society needed to and should exercise much more choice in our selection of what tools we use to satisfy our needs. He argued that we as a society should decide what we actually needed, rather than believing in the advertised articulation of our needs or self-serving needs of professionals who wanted us to become dependent on what they were experts of, whether it was education, medicine, technology, or energy. In this phase, he turned to the 12th-13th century to give himself a different vantage point to understand contemporary modern society and its underlying assumptions and beliefs.

He constantly seemed to ask the vital, important question: How did we get here? If we are here, we can get out of here, by thinking and acting together to a different understanding of our actual needs. His training as a Catholic priest, I believe, gave him a strong basis of asceticism, of advocating a radical simplicity of living, of realizing how little one could actually live with and be content. He lived simply and he advocated a “liberating austerity” in order to live one’s life without imposing on the poor. His work emerged out of his theological, historical training, and his genuine curiosity of other cultural understandings of the world. He was critical of entrenched hierarchies and abuses of excessive power wherever he found them.

Unfortunately, for the most part, the world is still under the spell of industrialized lifestyles which uses far more energy than needed and it is possible for all of us to have, given the excessive carbon we have released into the world. It was not that Illich or Gandhi was completely against industrialization or modernity, but rather they both thought as a society, we needed to slow down and contemplate, to discern, to figure out whether that was the best direction to go. If so, what did we actually need and how were we going to get there in terms of a fairer sense of ecology, equity, and economics that did not leave huge shadows of inaccessibility, poverty and inequality in their wakes?

In the 1990s he became focused on the notions of proportionality.⁴ Most of us did not understand quite what he meant back then. We would walk away from his erudite lectures on the history of proportionality in music and art and shake our heads, wondering, what did he mean? Now, I think he meant the following: What is the appropriate proportion of the use of energy, technology, institutions for a convivial society? How do we know when we have gone too far in our practices of knowledge, rituals, and culture; how can we recognize as a culture when they become threatening rather than liberating? How do we know when we are using too much carbon and make the necessary adjustments to our actions? How do we recognize this and move together on containing the damage? It was another way to expand his earlier idea of “thresholds”.

He also believed in the power of friendships, the table around which food is served and ideas are shared, in conviviality. In the fall of 1999, I invited him to come to the University of San Francisco as a part of my Davies Forum on the theme: *Voice, Memory and Landscape*. We had over 1000 people at the Presentation Theater (now the Gershwin Theater) and people lined the walls and the steps; they stayed for nearly three hours, listening to him while he swiftly moved amongst his twelve languages and his ideas. He was clearly in pain as he was battling a deadly cancer and we all sensed it may be the last time we see him. It was to be one of his last public lectures in San Francisco. The following year, during the fall 2000 and the spring 2001, Jerry Brown, when he was Mayor of Oakland, in between his two stints as Governor of California, brought Ivan Illich in a public collaboration he called, *The Oakland Table*.

Ivan Illich died peacefully the next year on December 2, 2002 in Bremen, Germany. He left a legacy of deep insights on our need to lessen our energy use as a way to enhance equity.

⁴ Illich moved deeply into the history of music, especially the notion of proportionality in music and how that radically changed from the seventeenth century to the eighteenth century. He argued that the music itself became “even tempered”. This change paralleled the movement of industrialization of society. We were not all convinced. I found it hard to follow his argument, though there were many who did.

His advocacy of a “celebration of awareness”, of being alert to those who would cunningly make us believe we needed more than we actually needed at a societal level, brought his Catholic priestly values in conversation with secular thinkers for over sixty years.

David Cayley’s two brilliant books on Ivan Illich and his ideas do the impossible: They focus on the complex relationships between Illich’s social critiques and his theological understandings. In *Ivan Illich: In Conversation*, David Cayley lets his own questions to Illich help unravel Ivan’s own insights into his life work. In some ways, it is easier to understand the range of Illich’s ideas in this book as it moves in the rhythms of conversations. Cayley, in his second book on Illich, *The Rivers North of the Future*, goes deep into Illich’s theological awakenings to help reveal the strong links to his social critiques of aspects of western modernity in its present form. In this book, Illich expounds the Biblical story of the Good Samaritan and reveals the new kind of love that entered with this story of Christ, the Samaritan who goes beyond his duty to help this stranger on the road and the ambivalent, metaphoric and civilizational consequences of that beautiful story he loved so much.⁵ (Cayley 2005, 1992)

Embodied Thresholds of Industrial Production: A Personal View

From September 1984 to January 1985, I worked various jobs at the Red Star Yeast factory in West Oakland. During that time, Ivan came and visited us in Berkeley. When I had to go early at 3:30 am for an early morning shift, he wanted to come with us to drop me off. On the way there, his eyes glittered with sparkling interest and he flooded me with incisive questions about the nature of the work I was doing, what it felt like, the specific tasks I was made to do.

⁵ See also Todd Hartch’s *The Prophet of Cuernavaca: Ivan Illich and the Crisis of the West* (2015).

Throughout that period, I became more and more aware of the ways in which this industrial production system inscribed itself onto my own body.

I moved large four feet high cylindrical bins full of small brown yeast modules across the factory floor. I slid gigantic waffle-shaped iron plates dripping with wet yeast streams, which fell furiously into a trapezoid-shaped trough gurgling with fast moving water. I was constantly afraid I would somehow trip and fall into that gushing sound, as we were standing on rickety ladders. Like everyone else, I had a white cap tightly covering my hair so not one strand could escape; thick goggles covering my eyes, a white chlorinated apron that covered my sweat-filled blue jeans and t-shirt. I moved always in a rush, as if I was constantly running out of time, no matter the task I was doing. Every two hours we had a fifteen-minute break. This was heavy, physical work, like which I had never done before. It was exhausting and wore me out. I had no energy to think before and after work.

A few weeks later, I was assigned to the assembly line at the center of the factory, behind a swiftly moving rubber sheet waist-high. It was a classic factory scene, one that reminded me of films with Charlie Chaplin, or I Love Lucy, where at some point in the story, the assembly line would go too fast and all of whatever they were helping make, whether chocolates or other objects would fall apart and a mirthful chaos would ensue. Except in this real-live scene, there was no laughter or comedy to relieve the tension. Here, a long, continuous bar of wet yeast packed tight but still tenderly soft to the touch, almost like soft tofu, would pass by in front of us. The main goal was to take out the badly damaged yeast bars.

In the central area of this assembly line work space, there was a two feet high set of blades moving swiftly in the shape of a Ferris wheel. The long rectangularly shaped yeast bar would be cut by each swiftly revolving knife and our job was to put our hands quickly into the

rolling knives and clean out the crumbly pieces of yeast that was stuck on the knives. The main reason was so that the machine would not stop. It was always a dangerous task. We were all aware of how sharp our attention had to be, so that we could withdraw our hands a split second before the next sharp knife blade could come down accidentally on our fingers.

Once the yeast was cut into one-pound bars, each yeast bar, one after the other, would go by, serenely as if eagerly waiting to be selected and picked by a customer. We were to examine each one for flaws and take the gentle, broken ones out and throw them into waiting containers. Then the final step was to have the plastic wraps roll around the yeast bars and get glued on. We would then take each of the wrapped yeast bars and pack up one cardboard box after another. After a few weeks of working on this factory line, I noticed that the factory engineer would come by, without looking over at us, and quietly crank up what looked like a wheel on a concrete pillar some distance away. I learned quickly that twice a day, he would speed up the machine. Months rolled by. (One night when I had to go to a very early morning shift, Ivan Illich, who was visiting for a few days, came to drop me off at the factory and during the half hour ride to the factory, he bombarded me with questions about the factory, how it worked, what I did.)

One day in early January 1985, despite our cautions, I heard a piercing scream from my fellow worker, also a University of California, Berkeley graduate. She had been a nationally ranked shot-put player and athlete and also worked another job at UPS. She must have been especially tired that day and the machine may have been cranked especially high. From the corner of my eye, I saw that blood sprayed and shot through the yeast near the rolling blades. My fellow worker was holding her hand, screaming with the pain and horror of it all; her fingers had been cut off. We stopped the relentless machine and searched for the bits of her hand

through the yeast bits. We found as many pieces as we could. Eventually over the following days and months ahead, they were sewn back together as best as it could be; her right hand would never be the same. It was horrifying and we were all devastated from this terrible accident. How did this happen to our fellow factory worker friend? We were aware that the accident could have happened to any one of us. It just happened to be her that very hour. A few days later, when we could not work on the factory floor because of the trauma involved, I was transferred to a cleaning section. Here, I lost the use of my eyes for a few hours because of a strong acid we were using to clean some products. I stopped working there a few days later, realizing that the \$10.45/hour I was getting paid was not worth the potential cost of losing a hand or an eye.⁶

I tell this story to illustrate the idea of “threshold” that Ivan Illich speaks often of. How do we recognize the thresholds beyond which we should individually and together decide to not cross? When a human life is threatened with disability in the business calculus of a huge corporation, one should be able to say no. Speed as the indicator of success is what Illich objected to. He often called it a key modern addiction. Whether it was time, or space, industrial productivity demanded a certain demand for unquestioning speed. Speed for the sake of speed was the enemy of the good, Illich would argue. It was a factory floor engineer upping the speed of the conveyer belt in order to make more one-pound yeast bars, without considering the health and safety of the workers making those yeast bars. This made me realize this fact in an embodied way. The bottom line did not register the wounds of the factory workers creating the yeast. The human being on the factory line was not a consideration, except as a means to an end; the human being was just a means to earn the profit, not a consideration in their own right.

⁶ Vijaya Nagarajan’s personal experience echoed the ways in which Ivan Illich had documented and analyzed the invisible assumptions of the industrial way of life.

It was on that concrete floor of the huge Red Star Yeast factory just abutting the West Oakland Bart Station that I encountered with my own bodily experience some of these root metaphors of industrial civilization. The rule my body learned to embody during those four months: Speed of production for the sake of speed without any regard to the safety of the human beings who created the industrial product.

I was reminded recently of this story with the two Boeing airplane accidents in Ethiopia and Indonesia. The speed of creating the design of this new type of airplane won over the possibility of death of hundreds of passengers from falling airplanes. I think of the increasing number of whale carcasses coming onto our shores; these whales have hundreds of pounds of plastic in their stomachs. They were starving. Somewhere our culture's calculus has failed us. The speed of instant convenience we get every time we use plastic to wrap, to extend the life of food, becomes a killing knife in the stomachs of large and small creatures, creating death wherever it lands, sometime soon after our daily use.

Recovering the Commons

Illich provided a new kind of language to understand the predicaments we found ourselves in, then and now. He spoke often in his public lectures and his writing of the following ideas: thresholds, liberating austerity, recovery of the commons, and proportionality. The climate problem can be seen as a classic problem of the "tragedy of the commons" variety, espoused by Garrett Hardin. The more cows you put in the pasture, the less grass there is for the cows to eat. And each cowherder, Hardin argued, will keep putting more and more cows until there is no more grass left. The Nobel Prize winning political economist, Eleanor Ostrum, argued against such a stark reality as oversimplified and distorting. She, as a researcher, discovered that the

commons was a much more convivial place, where communities can meet, organize themselves and create their own blueprint for sustainable survival, whether it be fisheries in Central America or irrigation water rights in Asia. She uncovered thousands of examples she helped document of successful commoning. So, the central question, she argued effectively is the following: how do we create shared local, regional, national, and global governance rituals, rules, and regulations for lowering carbon in the atmosphere? Illich, too, believed that each one of us as well as groups of us have an ethical responsibility to “recover the commons” in all its aspects as one strategy to deal with the history of scarcity. Illich’s landmark essay, “Silence is the Commons” appeared in the *Whole Earth Review* in 1983 and was later published in his *In the Mirror of the Past* (1990).

Inspired by Ivan Illich’s work on the commons, in January 1984, Lee Swenson and I co-founded *The Recovery of the Commons Project*, a small, non-profit, grassroots organization in Berkeley, with a launch event involving a public conversation between Gary Snyder and Lee Swenson called, “Anarchism, Buddhism, and Political Economy”. This work later became incorporated into the chapter, “The Place, The Region, and the Commons” in Gary Snyder’s excellent book, *The Practice of the Wild* (1990:25-47). We also created a small organization, Institute for the Study of Natural & Cultural Resources, where we organized dozens of encounters amongst workers: activists, writers, artists, and scholars who were recovering the commons in some way or another. We conducted weekly study groups, monthly public lecture series, annual visits of Ivan Illich, luncheon seminars, organized trips with community organizers to Mexico, India, Santa Fe, New England, Hawaii, etc.

A few months later, in Claremont, CA, Ivan Illich was working on a draft of his brilliant landmark book, *H2O and the Waters of Forgetfulness*. During dinner, his eyes excited, he asked for my help on a footnote on the ritual construction of space in India. Early the next morning, I

drew some of the ritual designs called *kolams* with rice flour I had learned from my mother and my grandmother on the front threshold of the house. He plied me with questions I could not answer for many hours. This seed grew into my research into gender, thresholds, ritual art, India and led to the publication of *Feeding A Thousand Souls: Women, Ritual, and Ecology in India, An Exploration of the Kolam* (Oxford University Press, 2018). These rice flour designs performed by millions of Tamil women every day in Tamil Nadu on the thresholds of their homes, temples, and businesses in southern India demarcated the separation between the private sphere of the household and the public nature of the street, acting almost as a doorway into the commons. It also became a mirror into my own past and led me subsequently to an exploration of the many “languages of the commons”.

Thresholds

Illich’s threshold concept comes out of the context of the “development” decades following WWII. The word, “development” was referred to as a metaphor for a living, growing form and yet, after WWI, it was used as a hierarchically, naturalized construction to elevate modern people as “developed” and the non-modern peoples as “underdeveloped”, “primitive,” “savage”, etc. This was especially done after WWII with Truman’s call to help develop the rest of the world, so that they can become more and more similar to the west. The western model was considered the pinnacle of the achievements of human beings. Ivan Illich, along with Wendell Berry, Leopold Kohr, Paulo Friere, and Rachel Carson, questioned these central assumptions of modernity. This is the core critique of Ivan Illich’s insights into “needs”. He argued in different ways and in different fields, that there is a history of needs, a history of

constructed needs and it behooves us to become familiar with its mechanisms so we recognize it when it comes down the road again, which it inevitably will.

In *Energy and Equity*, he states: “It has recently become fashionable to insist on an impending energy crisis. This euphemistic term conceals a contradiction and consecrates an illusion. It masks the contradiction implicit in the joint pursuit of equity and industrial growth. It safeguards the illusion that machine power can indefinitely take the place of bodily power.... To face this contradiction and betray this illusion, it is urgent to clarify the reality the language of crisis obscures: high quanta of energy degrade social relations just as inevitably as they destroy the physical milieu.” (15)⁷ He elaborates on the notion of the social threshold in the use of energy:

“The possibility of a third option is barely noticed. 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 any 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. The one option that is presently neglected is the only choice within the reach of all nations.... 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.” (Emphasis added) (17)

What is this third option? The “minimum feasible power” that would be both “modern” and desirable” is critical in Illich’s world-view. So, though he is falsely accused of being against modernity, he is clearly not. He is saying that the improvement of tools works to improve peoples’ lives “up to a point” and it is up to us in society to figure out how we understand when equity gets overshadowed by increased energy use. He notes that “equity and energy can grow

⁷ See Ivan Illich’s *Energy and Equity* (1974) for chapters on “The Energy Crisis,” “The Industrialization of Traffic,” “Speed-Stunned Imagination,” “The Elusive Threshold,” among others.

concurrently only to a point. Below a threshold of per capita wattage, motors improve the condition for social progress. Above this threshold, energy grows at the expense of equity.” (17) He is making explicit that this knowledge of when this threshold is approached for any tool is important to become aware of as a society. We need to track when each new technology comes into being, and when the tool becomes counterproductive to society. Technology has not had many limits put on its development or creativity. Elsewhere, he speaks of a bicycle speed society. He also saw the bicycle as a metaphor for lots of other technologies. How do we individually and collectively find the “bicycle” edge for our use of technologies? And when the use of technologies become counterproductive to the continued use of the climate commons, or any other kind of commons.

Illich also speaks of the term, “radical monopoly” as referring to “when one industrial production process exercises an exclusive control over the satisfaction of a pressing need, and excludes nonindustrial activities from competition.” (52) He explains how a radical monopoly emerges as a way by substituting one type of product for another more traditional use. For example, the car exerts a radical monopoly on traffic, “practically ruling out locomotion on foot or by bicycle in Los Angeles. ... That motor traffic curtails the right to walk,...”. This car-focused planning emerged as a need for transportation, thereby negating the use of feet or bicycles for moving ourselves around. Feet become lesser than, and because moving feet takes longer to get somewhere, cars monopolize the space that earlier were filled with walkers, making the use of feet obsolete. (52)

In 1983 in a working document, Illich spoke of the disillusionment from the enlightenment goals of yesteryear: “In fact, the ideal of the enlightenment... is now fading. It is fading for two reasons: first because many of us recognize that it has a dark future and second

because we understand that its descendance from past ideals is much less legitimate than we assumed.” (1983: 9) He asks himself:

“How shall I call the opposite project: the reconquest of the right to live in self-limiting communities, that each treasure their own mode of subsistence. Pressed, I would call this project the recovery of the commons. Commons, in custom and law, refer to a kind of space which is fundamentally different from the space of which most ecologists speak. ... The public environment is opposed to the private home. Both are not what “commons” mean. Commons are a cultural space that lies beyond my threshold and this side of wilderness. Custom defines the different usefulness of commons for each one. The commons are porous. The same spot for different purposes can be used by different people. And above all, custom protects the commons. The commons are not community resources; the commons become a resource only when the lord or community encloses them. Enclosure transmogrifies the commons into a resource for extraction, production or circulation of commodities. Commons are as vernacular as vernacular speech. I am not suggesting that it is possible to recreate the old commons. But lacking any better analogy, I speak of the recovery of the commons to indicate how, at least conceptually, [it can be understood]... Truly subsistence-oriented action transcends economic space, it reconstitutes the commons. This is as true for speech that recovers common language as for action which recovers commons from the environment.” (9-10)⁸ (Brackets added.)

Illich further argues for a “recovery of the commons” in subtle and explicit ways throughout the rest of his work and his life.

Gandhi and Illich

Bapu’s Hut. It is hard to leave Gandhi out of our picture today. He was another thinker-activist who saw through the consequences of our shared industrial dreams. He learned much from Thoreau. Thoreau, following Emerson, read many of the earliest English translations of Hindu texts such as the *Upanishads*, and the *Bhagavad Gita*, becoming one of the Transcendentalists. Thoreau also witnessed the beginnings of the industrial civilization. In some ways, I think of him being at the beginning of the parenthesis of ideas that we are trying

⁸ Illich, Ivan. 1983. *Eco-Pedagogy and the Commons*. April 1, 1983. 1-10. Cuernavaca, Mexico (Unpublished Draft of paper for discussion with Jerry Morris in *Techno-Politica* series).

desperately to parenthetically close. Strikingly, even as Thoreau was writing *Walden* in his hut near Walden Pond, he heard the whistle of the train going by every afternoon. Laura Walls says in her brilliant biography of Thoreau, “In writing *Walden*, Thoreau encouraged his readers to try the experiment of life for themselves, rather than inheriting its terms from others...Thoreau is often said to have turned to “Nature,” but what he actually turned to was, more exactly, the “commons”—spaces that, back then, were still open to everyone: woods, fields, and hilltops, ponds and blueberry thickets, rivers, meadows, trails up nearby mountains, the long open beaches on the Atlantic shore. Nearly all his writings use landforms and watersheds to explore the commons, expanding our shared natural and intellectual heritage until it touches the Cosmos itself.” (xiii)⁹

Gandhi, himself, some decades later combined Thoreau, Christianity, and the *Bhagavad-Gita* to understand how to wrest India from the British colonialists and created the political tools of satyagraha (truth-force), swaraj (self-rule), ahimsa (nonviolence), among others. Ivan Illich went and stayed briefly in one of Gandhi’s ashrams in the 1970s and wrote a beautiful essay, *Bapu’s Hut*.¹⁰ Illich was deeply influenced by his Catholic priestly life, and with Gandhi’s insights into the failures of western civilization, of excess desires constructed around a wasteful economy, the artificial creation of envy, and the lack of awareness of setting social limits. Illich states, in one of his many travels in India:

“It is only the people who have some vested interest who refuse to understand it. The rich do not want to understand. When I say rich, I mean all those people who have got conveniences of life which are not available to everybody in common. These are in living, eating and going about. Their modes of consumption are such that they have been deprived of the power to understand the truth. It is to these that Gandhi becomes a difficult proposition to understand and assimilate. They are the ones to whom simplicity does not make any sense. Their circumstances unfortunately do not allow them to see the

⁹ See Laura Wall’s *Thoreau: A life* (2017), for one of the most moving biographies of Thoreau. It is exquisitely written and charts his intellectual and spiritual journey through his writings and activism.

¹⁰ Illich, Ivan. *Bapu’s Hut*; See: <https://www.mkgandhi.org/museum/msgofbapuhut.htm>

truth. Their lives have become too complicated to enable them to get out of trap they are in.”¹¹

He reveals who the “rich” are in this context: They are the ones that use convenience that are not accessible to all. He adds:

“This hut connotes the pleasures that are possible through being at par with society. Here, self-sufficiency is the keynote. We must understand that unnecessary articles and goods that a man possesses reduce his power to imbibe happiness from the surroundings. Therefore, Gandhi repeatedly said that productivity should be kept within the limits of wants. Today’s mode of production is such that it finds no limit and goes on increasing uninhibited. All these we have been tolerating so far but the time has come when man must understand that by depending more and more on machines he is moving towards his own suicide. The civilized world, whether it is China or America has begun to understand that if we want to progress, this is not the way. Man should realize that for the good of the individual as well as of the society, it is best that people keep for themselves only as much as is sufficient for their immediate needs. We have to find a method by which this thinking finds expression in changing the values of today’s world. This change cannot be brought about by the pressure of the governments or through centralized institutions. A climate of public opinion has to be created to make people understand that which constitutes the basic society. Today the man with a motor car thinks himself superior to the man with a bicycle though, when we look at it from the point of view of the common norm, it is the bicycle which is the vehicle of the masses. The cycle, therefore, must be given the prime importance and all the planning in roads and transport should be done on the basis of the bicycle, whereas the motor car should get a secondary place.”¹²

Thoreau, Gandhi, Illich, and Pope Francis articulate with deep clarity what we as a society need to do. Reducing our energy desires for the sake of convenience at a collective level, so that the excess production of energy for some is reduced and the not enough energy situation is increased for millions of others on the same planet. We no longer can remain on the path we have been on. The Green New Deal proposed by the new Congress in February 2019 reflects the moral imperative of Pope Francis’s *Encyclical on Climate Change and Inequality* and Ivan Illich’s long ago call for a discernment of our energy needs.¹³ It is a response to the potentiality

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Green New Deal; <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-resolution/109/text> Accessed on April 22, 2020.

of collective death induced by climate change. Ivan Illich's collective work could not be but a critical voice that speaks clearly to our present moment of climate chaos. The "recovery of the commons" as Ivan Illich called for so many decades ago is not a vague possible option, but a necessary imaginative tool to work ourselves towards a way out of this predicament of runaway "needs" and desires.

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