Towards Illich's 'Legibility":
Returning to Ivan through the Mirror of the Past

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Introduction

In 2013, in an Italian reissue of *Gender,* Giorgio Agamben told us that "perhaps only today the work of Ivan Illich is getting to know what Walter Benjamin called 'the hour of legibility'"[2]. There he spoke to us of the relevance of re-reading Illich from our present. Seven years later, the world is going through an unprecedented global crisis, which the elite of professionals and experts have called a *pandemic*. An *amoeba word*[3] from our Newspeak *uniquack*[4] has been coined to expand this mental state to the so-called global society and it is multiplied by the force of electrons in human-cyborgs-screens: COVID-19.

In what follows, we take up Agamben's thesis from other angles to arrive at a common challenge: the factual possibility of Illich becoming legible in all its full dimension in times when Ivan's work itself appears trapped by the same evils that he denounced. This is an incomplete essay that is presented as a prelude and invitation to subversive action, understanding that returning to Illich is both pertinent and urgent.

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[2] Giorgio Agamben, *"Introduzione"* in *"Genere"* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2013)

[3] Ivan Illich and Barry Sanders, *ABC: The Alphabetization of the Popular Mind,* (San Francisco, Ca: North Point Press, 1988)

[4] Ivan Illich and Barry Sanders, *ABC: The Alphabetization of the Popular Mind* (San Francisco, Ca: North Point Press, 1988)

An Urgent Reading

Illichean thought is presented today in a diverse set of post-capitalist narratives, struggles, disciplines and fields. Sometimes this is explicit, but most of the time there are clear connections without a direct reference. Examples abound: the so-called *degrowth* paradigm; the various initiatives that promote various forms of *deschooling*; and the increasingly vigorous movement for *open access to scientific knowledge*. In all of them we find links and direct connections to ideas that run through several of Illich's works. Many times this link is not explicit and on a few occasions the authors refer occasionally to some passages of the so-called "Cuernavaca pamphlets". We believe that this is a problem: we do not want to point out the need to vindicate his figure or proclaim a certain academic purism. What we see is that behind this "tangentiality" hides a certain form of superficiality, a rhetoric that loses sight of the deep and systemic criticism that was the backbone of its intellectual edifice. The general ignorance of the entirety of it finds an explanation, albeit partially, in the current difficulty to *read* in depth the complete set of his work. This is directly linked to a problem of *inaccessibility*, as well as the need to generate dynamics and relationships with its most lucid interpreters.

At the same time, a reading of Illich today deserves to understand the context of the production of meaning where his work originally took shape. This is necessary as a way of recovering the central conceptual knots of the critique of modernity, those same ones that today are already exploded, far beyond any possible threshold of tolerance. Otherwise, we run the risk that these narratives become fossilized as pieces within an intellectual museum, frequented by a few sporadic visitors.

Retrieving *Philia*

A deep, rigorous and action-oriented recovery process of Illich's thought over mere bookish or intellectual elaboration requires a return to its sources, to the contexts where the web of meanings that make up each of the pieces of the puzzle were woven. The lines of construction of each of them show that Illich never worked alone, he knew how to surround himself with friends and collaborators, whom he invited to his table ready for convivial conversation. Such gatherings were a breeding ground for his reflections, taking shape in incomplete texts, as well as in drafts which circulated in those circles of friendship to later appear in diverse types of compilations in book format. This collective, dialogical, cumulative, incremental and creative process requires itself to be studied, in the light of the current time where collaborative writing, versions of texts and always imperfect rewriting are some of the pillars of the so-called "Wiki culture," supporting the most extensive collective intellectual production in the history of mankind.

Leaving this last methodological aspect aside for now, when reviewing the names of those who were part of Illich's table, we find one of several reasons for an urgent return to Illich's thought. Friendship, *philia*, a central issue in Ivan's life and thought, enabled the meeting of dozens of thinkers and activists who are absolutely fundamental for the construction of a critical narrative about Development and Modernity. These men and women are essential today for understanding that past that contained the keys to anticipate a future that arrived and today constitutes our present. Several of these people have already died and many of them are going through the final stage of their lives. They were part of the collective conversations and reflections that help us to understand the contexts where each of the pieces in Ivan's collection took shape. Never was the collaboration that of disciples or vertical relationship structures—

typical of the academic production model prevalent within universities—despite Ivan's strategic "milking" of Alma Mater without being trapped within them.

At the same time, each of these Illich friends developed their own intellectual work, linking, intertwining and expanding aspects addressed by their shared work. Illich's complete readability will unfailingly imply the direct collaboration of his friends, both for accessing materials that are now almost lost or limited to a privileged few, as well as for the guidance and orientations for a deep understanding of his positions.

The intergenerational exchange characterizing Illich's "method" was based on deep friendship and collaborative relationships, beyond all those dynamics of plunder, appropriation and opportunism that not infrequently underlie the motivations of "the thought professionals" who live in the Ivory Towers. In the same vein, it will be necessary to critically review the recent intellectual production that emerged from there at the hands of young academics who cast their gaze on the "Illich subject" when it was convenient for their own professional careers. A reading situated in the present and oriented to action for transformation of the world must go much further than that. Inescapably what is revealed is both an interpretive and action incapacity toward which the school-minded position leads. It becomes critically necessary, then, to revisit the concepts of "counterfoil research" and "convivial tools" toward retrieving ways of dialoging and revisiting Illich's work.

It is not about "reading Illich", but about "reading from Illich" to enable a live dialogue with him in order to understand the world around us. The vast majority of us, who were unable to meet Ivan in life, may perhaps be able to dialogue with him by emulating him in his relationship with Hugh of St. Victor, Abelard and other of his 12th century friends.

This exercise of recovery, reconstruction, reconnection and reinterpretation is presented as an urgent and extremely important task for those of us who seek to exercise activism based on deep critical reflection. As has already been said: reading Illich today should not have the purpose of promoting a debate for a few enlightened interpreters. Neither should a retrieval of Illichian thought feed sterile reflections disengaged from real processes—those inhabited by ordinary people who, as Ivan said two decades ago "get to see what scientists and administrators don't see." For this reason, it is imperative to explore specific ways to make Illich's thought profusely legible in times where the overabundance of discursivities, narratives and information block our collective capacities to distinguish the banal from the really important.

In Search of Lost Texts

Some reasons why and from where to read Illich have been outlined so far: the importance of completing the map of meanings that surrounded each of his contributions; the urgency of intergenerational dialogue between readers and collaborators; and an action-oriented search that goes beyond prerogatives of the Academy. At this point, our collective task is confronted by a series of difficulties of a theoretical and practical nature that have as their starting point the very end of Ariadna's thread of the question: if the moment has arrived for Ivan's legibility, then we must begin by being able to read him—this in the most literal and practical sense of the task. To move our eyes over those words, paragraphs, chapters, footnotes and general structures that shaped the texts from what he made known as "Pietro Lombardo's

generation"—the subject to which Ivan dedicated various reflections in his quest to elucidate the origin of the textual culture that has shaped our way of reading and thinking[5].

Illich's texts—recorded on the page in the form of articles, drafts, pamphlets, books and compilations—were codified with the use of that instrument known as the alphabet, the same one that fascinated him. There are tens and hundreds of them, some of them accessible, some others kept as treasures within the reach of a few, with many still unknown and hidden. Originally written in several languages, rewritten or partially translated in many others, his texts are partly scattered, fragmented and, in the case of his most famous pamphlets, mediated by the commercial imperative.

Making possible a "legibility" that contributes to our collective and urgent need to multiply "other possible worlds" seems to need to confront several of the problems to which Illich himself devoted a large part of his efforts. It is then a question of returning to Illich from Illich. Below we will refer to only two of those problematic nodes that are essential to explore in order to outline responses to the challenge posed. In the first place the issue of scarcity, on the other the issue of "the digital".

Scarcity as an Avoidable Destination

The issue of scarcity is present in one way or another in the different stages of Ivan's intellectual journey. To begin, Illich identified modern institutions as producers of demands and needs anchored in scarcity[6]. Of institutions, he described them as a "theater of the plague, a spectacle of shadows producing demands that generate scarcity". Later, he would promote what

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[5] Ivan Illich, *"En el viñedo del texto: un comentario al 'Didascalicon' de Hugo de San Victor"*, (México: FCE, 2002)
[6] David Cayley, *Ivan Illich in Conversation*, 154

he called a years-long research endeavor in which he shaped "a history of scarcity", a project that he began fully in his books *Shadow Work* and *Gender*. There the relationship between education and the economy becomes explicit, which led him to the concept of *homo educandus* based on the prior idea of *homo economicus* that he took from Polanyi.

For our case, we can think about Illich's work as a "means of knowledge" and the scarcity which governs access to it, following Illich. Much of his work has become artificially scarce—as merchandise, the "intellectual property" of certain elite publishing circuits (e.g. commercial ebooks). Some require special privileges to access (e.g. academic libraries in the global north). Still others are in the hands of private companies (e.g. CIDOC materials). Though many unpublished works exist, much of Illich's work that has been published has become scarce by power structures whose existence is based upon the limitation or inaccessibility of those materials. Illich put it in these terms:

> The economic sciences always assume a postulate of scarcity. What is not scarce cannot be subjected to economic control. This applies to goods and services as well as to work. This postulate has permeated all modern institutions.[7]

Thus, it seems that Illich's legacy has fallen into the same modern traps that he sought to denounce: counterproductive libraries, commercial publishers, techno-monopolies that engulf the memory of the once-held realms of communality. Prisoner of the regimes of scarcity—read intellectual property or digital rights management systems (DRM)—Illich's work has become itself scarce in educational curricula:

> I came to understand education as 'learning,' when it takes place under the assumption of scarcity in the means which produce it.[8]

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[7] Ivan Illich, *"El trabajo fantasma"*, (México: FCE, 2008), 153
[8] Ivan Illich, "A Plea for Research on Lay Literacy" in *In The Mirror of the Past*, (New York, N.Y.: Marion Boyars, 1992), 159

From our perspective, this issue cannot be fully explained because of "a lack of interest" in Illich or only an issue affecting his "unpublished works". Rather, we must look at the power structures, the modern institutions and educational mythologies that base their existence in the limitation to access and the creation of scarcity.

The Digital Paradox

In the final stage of his life, Illich witnessed the end of the bookish culture and the first effects of what he called "the era of systems", the algorithmization of life, the passage from page to screen, *La perte des sens*. It was "a cyber nightmare state for the 21st century"[9]. He argued that an epoch had ended during his lifetime, and that he as a historian and archaeologist saw more clearly than ever the mirror where the textual past gave way to a future of *cyborgs*, similar to the moment when orality gave way to writing. At his own funeral some of his words about this were read:

> What has been composed can decompose. The past can be re-evoked. But Paul Celan knew that only smoke remains from the world-dwindling that we have experienced. It is the virtual drive of my computer that serves me as the symbol for this irretrievable disappearance, and through which the loss of world and flesh can be envisaged[10]

The fragments of Illich's legacy have also been scattered in that dark digital world that he understood as inhuman and as inevitable. Today some of his best-known books, the ones he told to Cayley that were "dead," are being offered commercially in e-book format through Amazon. The book Illich considered his best work, *In the Vineyard of the Text*, is not available for sale in

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[9] David Cayley, *Ivan Illich in Conversation*, 198
[10] Ivan Illich, "The Loss of World and Flesh", (1993). Accessed at
https://www.pudel.samerski.de/pdf/IllichBecker_en.pdf

paper while the most direct form of access is through a digital version scanned without much care, and barely legible (the same thing happens for the original version in English and for the edition in Spanish). Meanwhile a huge number of Illich's texts are lost, as many are hidden in long abandoned websites, falling victim to a digital death at the rate of the advance of the digital monoculture of Google, Amazon, Facebook and other titans of the so-called "corporate technocapitalism."

Faced with this scenario, we might wonder to what extent "digital" can bring us Illich without further increasing the opacity and distance from the real meaning of his word. At the same time, it seems necessary to navigate the waters of virtuality while walking the corridors of deserted analog libraries to get back to that intellectual legacy that has the clues to escape the cybernetic nightmare that surrounds us. In that sense, the paradox becomes twofold when it is essential to read Illich in order to make him legible for this century.

Through the Mirror of the Past

We conclude this brief essay by stating that the problem requires deploying a collective creative action in the face of the challenges posed. That is the guideline of our search, to find in Illichean thought the scaffolding to recover and "democratize" it, to free it from the condition of artificial scarcity and darkness in which it has plunged. It is not about limiting ourselves to seeing through that mirror of the past, but about traveling through it. Move between the two waters. If the epistemic rupture that Illich described is irreversible, something of what was is also contained in what is. We think that *something* is *the text*, and he also identified it:

The world of cybernetic modelling, of computers as root metaphors for felt perception, is dangerous and significant only as long as there is still textual literacy in the midst of it.[11]

Thinking about "the text" as a tool for conviviality, takes us back to looking at the word in a living sense forged in the heat of the art of conversation. Going back to review the process of collective intellectual creation that took place in Cuernavaca—the circulation of drafts, translations and re-adaptations—reveals a form of relationship with the textual that was there all the time; the living text, the printed word that circulates around the table of friends. From the marginal notes in the mythical and almost inaccessible CIDOC *Cuadernos,* to the exercise of commenting on Hugh's *"Didascalicon"*, Illich showed us the capacity of the text to weave a relationship of senses and affections in all directions: from the past to the present, from the superficial to the deep, from the *I* to the *we*.

It is worth wondering about the possibilities of appropriating the digital, from a convivial doing, outside of institutional contexts, in order to create in a vernacular sense, the re-invention of the relationship that is contained in that juxtaposition called "digital text". Returning to Hugh of St. Victor with Illich, we confront this ubiquitous modern that places technology at the service of domination, with that other conception where the tool can be, instead, a remedy for the recovery of what some call "lost paradise"[12].

It will be our task, sons and daughters of computerized text, to retrace our steps, shake off all the certainties of the catastrophic world that surrounds us in order to inhabit it and transform it with our eyes on the past, our hands on the ground and our readings on the roots. Illich's

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[11] David Cayley, *Ivan Illich in Conversation*, (Toronto, CA: House of Anansi Press, 1992), 382

[12] Ivan Illich, *En el Viñedo del Texto: Un Comentario al 'Didascalicon' de Hugo de San Victor*, (México: FCE, 2002)

readability for our time will only be possible if we throw ourselves into the radical act of renouncing what is presented to us as self-evident. We must make tools from *philia*, in the interstices of systems and subsystems, that allow us to read and converse in the complete history of our tragic civilizing course. We should focus our efforts on the creation of an international network of intellectuals and *hacktivists*, beyond the conventional institutional and academic dynamics, that pursues the recovery, digitization, interpretation and dissemination of the entire intellectual heritage of Ivan Illich. Such a network can be the framework for the creation of various convivial tools that aim to this end. Our task is to think and do beyond the logic of the market, the liberal ideology of Rights, to build our own open digital technologies.

If the time has come for Illich to be legible, we will have to go to meet him: on the one hand, the young, famous and explosive Illich of the 70s who instigated subversive action against all the established powers; on the other, the old, intimate and warm Illich who in his humble self-criticism guided us to the depths, roots and origins of all the certainties of the world that surrounds us and oppresses us.

To begin to draw up a plan of how to recover his enormous intellectual production, let us return to the young Illich:

> As the library got 'better' the book was further withdrawn from the handy bookshelf. The reference librarian placed himself between people and shelves; now he is being replaced by the computer (…) a library is a model of a convivial tool, a site that offers free access and does not obey rigid programs, a site where you take or leave what you want, beyond all censorship.[13]

To understand the political dimension of taking matters into our own hands, let's remember that old Illich who once said:

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[13] Ivan Illich, *"Tools for Conviviality"*, (USA: Harper & Row, 1973), 77

> I was lacking in trust in the extraordinary creativity of people and their ability to live in the midst of what frustrates bureaucrats, planners, and observers …. We now live in a world in which most of those things that industry and government do are misused by people for their own purposes.[14]

Our political action should be radical, subversive and *deschooled*, in the deep and complete sense of the term. Those convivial tools that we must co-create will combine orality, textuality and digitality, allowing us to "go through the mirror" to find Illich in the same way that he did in his travels in time. Along with Illich, we will have to make readable the texts that

> became projections of my (Illich's) thought, and texts in which others could perceive the structure of my (Illich's) thought. I want those who are willing to study with me (Illich) to engage in the exegesis of these old texts, to move into this foreign milieu, to move into the magic circle which is surrounded by the dead who for a moment come alive as shadows, as skeins.[15]

With Illich we must return to words, return to friends, return to the dead. And when we return from the other side of the mirror, to find ourselves again in this present of pandemics and catastrophes, we come "back into the present, not to abdicate but to assume fully the destiny."[16] Our time cannot be understood from the present, since we can hardly live in it. That is why we will need to go through Illich's mirror.

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[14] David Cayley, *Ivan Illich in Conversation*, (Toronto, CA: House of Anansi Press, 1992), 197
[15] David Cayley, *Ivan Illich in Conversation*, (Toronto, CA: House of Anansi Press, 1992), 378
[16] David Cayley, *Ivan Illich in Conversation*, (Toronto, CA: House of Anansi Press, 1992), 379

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