

Prologue

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I don't know how to write this introduction that will serve as a prologue to the Jean Robert articles selected for this special issue of the *Journal of Illich Studies* (which will appear for the first time in Spanish). It's not an homage, or an introduction to his immense bibliography. Rather, it is an attempt to offer some context and clues for the selected readings, especially for the younger generations that didn't have the opportunity to accompany Jean Robert during his life. I don't even know where to start, partially because of what I experience when I think about our friendship that was cultivated throughout 50 years and animated by many heterogeneous yet shared passions, ranging from the dry toilet, the life and work of Ivan Illich, to the Zapatistas.

In conversation, and sometimes in his writing, Jean would jump to topics that appeared to have no relation whatsoever to what was being discussed. I have never experienced anything like what Jean was capable of doing, eruditely and originally connecting elements that didn't have any obvious relationship. The range of his interests and knowledge was wide enough to sustain this peculiar ability, which was very unsettling for us at times. I think it's important to bear this in mind when reading Jean's work, because there's always several openings towards many different directions alongside the main theme he addresses in each piece of work.

A similar thing happened with his language. In the last years of his life, Jean's words escaped the constraints of employing a single language. At any given time, he would often throw into the mix words from Spanish, English, French, Italian, German, and even Latin or Greek. He

didn't do this to cite or reference specific phrases. It wasn't a matter of making a mistake, showing off, or pedantry. When Jean couldn't find a word to share precisely what he was seeing or trying to say in the language he was using, he would borrow a word from another language he spoke to express himself more effectively. This led to fascinating conversations when the person listening didn't know the language he selected and asked for an explanation of the word or phrase employed by Jean. In that moment it became clear that an accurate translation was impossible; he had used a foreign word or phrase precisely because he couldn't accurately describe what he was feeling or seeing in the language being employed in the conversation.

All this to say that Jean's life and work cannot be categorized into neat professional or disciplinary categories. He always blurred their boundaries. His astounding coherency allowed him to do away with the limitations of the disciplines and professions he was knowledgeable of and easily navigated across. This coherency extended itself to his daily life, whose practices effectively reflected his theoretical or political stances. His refusal to own or use an automobile is a particularly admirable example. His vigorous critique of the modern system of urban transportation, which often included practical proposals to avoid the disasters and disturbances to every-day life prompted by these urban systems, was always reflected in his own behavior. He used his feet, a bicycle, or public transit to get from place to place. He didn't partake in the systems he critiqued, like academics frequently do.

On September 19th of 1985, I remember well his response to the earthquake that wreaked havoc in many parts of the country. He traveled from Cuernavaca to Mexico City with a pickaxe in hand; he was committed to directly addressing the emergency, rather than merely spectating. In the end he had to leave the pickaxe somewhere in the city, because he ended up spending many hours translating for rescue brigades that had come from various different countries. The

brigades had arrived at the scene of the Medical Center's collapse but were unable to coordinate and act because they couldn't communicate amongst themselves.

Thanks to a fortunate encounter with Jean on September 8th of 2018—during which we discussed the consequences that the rumor of his cancer had on his interactions with others—we started corresponding and exchanging documents that included fragments of what he was working on. The collection of correspondence over the course of a year could be published as a small book, because it shows the free power of Jean's thought, unreservedly deployed over many pages in that wise and creative stretch at the end of his life. In the first letter, from September 9, he alludes to his "legacy." The word seems "grandiloquent" to him, but he feels he must use it because he has "far more unedited work than published work." Amongst his unedited work he specifies four types of text, which he was actually working on during the last two years of his life and that provide useful clues for ordering these materials. Inevitably, I think of a certain similarity with Foucault. After all, many of us consider Foucault's posthumously published texts to be his best work. I think something similar could happen with Jean. He has innumerable texts of substantial value, whose publication was delayed and ultimately abandoned due to circumstantial factors.

In the end, I can't write this prologue or *pro-logo*, an argument intended to celebrate, highlight, or clarify the thoughts in the subsequent articles. I will restrict myself instead to saying that these articles provide windows into the immense landscape of Jean's work, a landscape that we hope to continue exploring in many ways.

I can't conclude before saying that Jean was, above all else, a good and generous man. These virtues, which are increasingly rare in our current society, were at the core of his existential expression. His natural benevolence and generous spirit were remarkable. Because of

these virtues, one could always count on Jean, even on the most unconventional adventures or when the occasion required Jean to make important sacrifices with regards to what he has doing. These virtues are evident in his writing, as will become apparent in the following articles. Discovering Jean's world is always a simultaneously intellectual, political, and moral experience.

The Chapters of This Special Issue

And you, are you free? I pass on to you, reader, the question that the Zapatistas asked us during the *escuelita* (the 'little school'). They had just explained to us their idea of freedom, derived from their condition of autonomous subsistence, and they asked us the question: "And you, are you free?" On his return, Jean tried to answer it. He did it discreetly, at his home in a suburb of Cuernavaca. And then he produced the remarkable essay that appears at the beginning of this issue.

Can one be free in a modern city? Jean asked himself. To answer this question, he had to ask himself about modernity, capitalism, work, commodities and much of what makes up everyday life in any city in the world. He radically questioned the usual perceptions of this 'normal' world and dismantled them one by one. Those who dare to follow him will not be able to keep those perceptions, if they had them. Perhaps they will end up, like him, rejecting the ways in which we have been shaped by capitalism - the heads as much as the hearts. Perhaps he or she will stop loving what he/she has loved up to now and abandon some of his/her most deeply held beliefs and desires. And he/she might even now set his/her heart on the conquest of a freedom that most of the city's inhabitants are unaware of.

In this essay Jean explores the possibility of a common sense that he calls controversial. He wonders if the people of the countryside—like the Indian peoples, like the Zapatista peoples—can share their common sense with the people of the city, and by showing the immense contrast between the living conditions of these very diverse groups he suggests that this common sense, if it could be constructed, would be controversial, it would have different versions. That is the challenge it poses to us.

As usual, Jean’s astonishing erudition is evident in this essay, which explores with familiarity authors from many centuries ago as well as the current publications of international technical groups or Mexican bureaucracies. Each footnote is loaded with clues to topics to be explored. They are often indispensable to give precision to unusual concepts, such as ‘ghost work.’

This essay appears at the beginning of this issue because it is above all an invitation to think about everything in a different way, which is what Jean did systematically throughout her life. It is a different way of thinking that Jean is building together with his readers, just as he did with his friends, by sharing with them his readings, his experiences, his intuitions and his often surprising discoveries.

Can we have that ‘controversial common sense’ that Jean advocates, in the mirror of the Zapatista *escuelita*?

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The second text in this issue, “Can we think after economics?,” complements the first in a peculiar way. We present it here in the reverse order of the two essays in *Alternative*

Modernities, the book edited by Daniel Inclán, Lucía Insalata and Mária Millán, in a collection that explores alternative modernities and a new common sense: the prefigurations of a non-capitalist modernity. The book's questions explain the order in which Jean's essays were published. The one we now order in second place opened the first section, which asked about a non-capitalist material culture. The one published here in the foreground opened the third section, on "The Political and the Common."

It seemed to us that the radical critique of the world we live in and the way we think and feel about it was an appropriate cover for anyone who is going to read a selection of Jean's essays, all of which are inscribed in that critique. That essay can be seen as an appropriate preparation of the horizon of ideas that defines the life and work of Jean, who never felt comfortable with what he was given, who took nothing without passing it through the filter of his sharp criticism. In the same way that he refused to own a car, in the framework of his critique of rapid transport and urban roads—he always tried to put his ideas into practice—Jean never accepted anything he heard or read about the economy, he continually subjected it to his radical critique and thus was well prepared to think beyond capitalism.

The second chapter of this issue explains with great theoretical and historical rigor the way in which capitalism can be characterized as the permanent war against autonomous subsistence. Jean allows us to see the conditions under which we become complicit with our enemies in our everyday activities and the practices that might bring us back to our own side.

The text is part of a critique of professions and professionals, both the theory and practice of the professional mode, and is a good window to address ideas of Ivan Illich, with whom Jean lived for almost half a century. With the guidance of both, we can clearly rethink our priorities, beyond capitalism, beyond economics.

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In “The Social Construction of Sex,” the third chapter of the issue, Jean continues to dissolve the ground beneath our feet by critically examining the assumptions on which the social order is based. He not only shows and demonstrates the historical character of sex, its birth in the modern era, and unreservedly takes on board Illich’s devastating critique of historians who have sought to invent a pre-capitalist history of sex. It also, with Illich, reveals how the historical transition from vernacular gender to economic sex is the true birth of economics.

It seemed pertinent to us that following the reflection on the economy, in the second chapter, there appears a text that apparently has nothing to do with that and starts from a reflection on the homosexual condition. Jean himself plays with the ideas he is addressing by asking if he should consider himself a gay man in the economy, to immediately clarify why he would not do so: dissidence must follow another path, first of all by questioning the classification based on what would be normality, the norm. He is questioning, with all due respect, the attitudes of his gay friends who have approached him.

Jean quotes Illich in arguing for the need to write the history of the ‘normal human’:
“Parallel to the history of the *deviant*, marked by exclusion, a history of the *normal human*, the heterosexual, should be written today. As long as we do not know more about the conceptual orthopedics that precedes the social construction of the heterosexual, masculine or feminine, we will not be able to understand the *economic* character of the conjugal couple and of our society subject to mercantile production.”

Jean argues that “the devices that keep both the shaky edifices of *economic development* and sacrosanct *sexual normality standing* appeal to the same prejudices, make use of the same unquestioned certainties, base their theorems on the same axioms.” Jean recalls that Foucault recognized the historical character of sex and when asked what came before him, he referred to the erotic arts. Thus, Jean argues, sexuality would be the parallel subjection of the erotic arts to the same law of economy.

Their position is clear. Instead of assuming any minority identity, demanding respect for those who fall into any of the categories into which we have been placed, we need to resist those definitions and classifications, and especially the way in which our condition is sought to be **corrected** to conform to the norm through some form of therapy. It is about radically opposing the patriarchal style in which our specific condition is tolerated as long as we are willing to submit to the therapies that correct it. This is why Jean suggests that her homosexual friends could express their dissidence in another way.

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In “When there are no words and concepts are shadows,” the next chapter, Jean seems to be rounding off his reflections on autonomous subsistence that appeared in the first chapter. He does so masterfully by referring to a seminar on “The Perspective of Subsistence”, organized in Germany, which El Gallo attended - by which Jean alludes to the newspaper supplement “El Gallo Ilustrado” in which a good part of the contributions to that seminar and of Jean’s works published in this issue were originally published. However, by referring to El Gallo’s interventions in the seminar, Jean opens a new discussion on a theme that is present from the first

paragraphs of the first essay and that does not fail to manifest itself in all the writings, but only here is it explicitly addressed: How do we know that we know? What is the character of the ‘knowledge’ that science claims to offer us?

After referring to the question of subsistence, which is the theme of the seminar, Jean enters fully into the discussion of the character of science, of its specific biases. He addresses directly and openly, with his customary clarity, the scope of the gaze, what it means to have a perspective, how the ‘objectivity’ of science can be called into question, and most importantly, something that was continually present in Jean’s life and work: the way in which political liberation, which defines his vital motivation, cannot be hung on concepts—mere shadows—and even less on scientific ones.

Written in 1988, this essay seems prepared for today’s predicaments, when inherited language is entirely incapable of addressing our ‘crises’—in that the very word ‘crisis’ is in the situation to which it refers, in a profound ‘crisis’... —and when concepts are shadows.

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When Ivan Illich put us on the trail of Ludwig Fleck and some of us dared to read *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact: An Introduction to the Theory of Thinking Styles and Thinking Collectives*, some of our strongest convictions, both about “scientific truths” and about our general perceptions of “truth” and reality itself, fell to pieces. It was indeed strange that the book had remained in obscurity and that discussions of these issues barely mentioned it. It seemed important then to stimulate debate on the matter and I asked Jean for a review for *El Gallo*

Ilustrado. Jean agreed with enthusiasm and concern. I won't be able to do it in the right size for *El Gallo*," he said, "I'll have to do several chapters." And so it turned out—five of them!

I must confess that it was only then, when we reached the end of Jean's review, that I understood what Fleck's contribution meant. It was even more serious than I had thought when I read it. Jean manages to explain well how certain "precise but limited scientific ideas are transformed into overwhelming certainties", into 'truths' assumed by society as a whole, often out of context. He also explained how these certainties, which become a common way of thinking in certain places and contexts, "in turn influence the formation of scientific ideas."

Fleck made a serious attempt to write for a wide audience. But it was inevitable that his three scientific specialties would influence the text and he could not avoid handling technical explanations that make the book difficult to read. As was his habit, Jean did not only go into depth in that reading—it was really remarkable the way he discovered what authors often uncover in their texts. He complemented it with many others, gave us the context in which Fleck wrote the book, did with it what Fleck proposed to do with scientific ideas, and allowed us to really appreciate—and understand—what this book did.

Jean's review seems written for today, even though it is more than 30 years old. Rarely has there been a more spectacular case than that of the pandemic in which certain limitless ideas become "overwhelming certainties", the conditions under which most of the world's population is assuming as 'reality', as 'indisputable truth', as if they were hard and fast empirical facts, what are only vague ideas insufficiently elaborated, which have a precise and limited use. Jean reminded us of a strong statement by Fleck that today seems to have more application than ever: "Societies get the diseases they deserve."

Jean's review is not easy either, although it poses fewer difficulties than Fleck's book. But an attentive and careful reading of his text is indispensable today.

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Jean wrote that text in 1988. Twelve years later, at the beginning of the year 2000, he mentions Fleck's book again when reflecting on climate change. A lot of water has flown under the bridge since then. *The Guardian*, for example, was right when it made it editorial policy never to mention 'climate change' or 'global warming' again, considering them to be mere euphemisms for what we were really suffering from: climate collapse. We have not yet dared to acknowledge that the climate we had has disappeared and that we know little about the new one, except that it is the cause of all sorts of catastrophes. However, what Jean wrote more than 20 years ago remains fully valid. His rigorous critique of the use of science to give supposed legitimacy to what is being propagated is still entirely relevant.

The manias that Jean observed 20 years ago have multiplied and become more pronounced in the newspapers. The same group of scientists and organizations that often fail in their weather forecasts for the next day dare to circulate as if their climate forecasts five, ten or fifty years from now were factual. By dismantling the fallacies of their reasoning and procedures, Jean insists once again on the need to trust our own perceptions and resist what is constantly used to mold us into ideas and behaviors as far removed from reality as they are close to the interests of the dominant groups.

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The last chapters of this collection form a coherent whole, although they were written in very different circumstances and at very different times. They are texts in which Jean applies his deep reflection and his complex and diversified theoretical framework to concrete and immediate realities and constructs options, which have almost always been formulated from practice with other people and groups.

In these chapters there are three fields to which Jean dedicated a good part of his life: energy, transport and water. Many of us participated with Wolfgang Sachs and Ivan Illich in reflecting on the social construction of energy, on the way in which this ameba word infects the whole of life. As far as I know, no one went as far as Jean in that reflection, displaying a technical mastery that the rest of us lacked and his characteristic originality. As for transport, Jean's contribution has all the facets. In his theoretical reflection, he gave accessible expression to Illich's theses and completed them decisively. In his technical contribution, he combined his multiple eruditions with concrete practices in very diverse contexts to construct options that at times seem entirely utopian but are generally incredibly practical, applicable. They impress by their radical novelty and almost seem to be from another planet...but it turns out that they can be immediately put into practice. And so Jean did, walking, giving up his car, attending endless meetings and accepting criticism and disqualifications in order to persist in an increasingly urgent endeavor. Perhaps today is Jean's moment—when, thanks to the “pandemic,” many eyes have been opened and the awakening is driving all kinds of initiatives by those who are only now starting to think seriously about what needs to be done. On the subject of water, Jean dealt with countless practical issues—such as the dry toilet—but he also connected the question with high-density theoretical aspects, as he does here in an exceptional article.

It is impossible to find a text that can be a kind of conclusion or synthesis of Jean's thought and action. But the one we have left at the end fulfills in a certain way that function, by showing in a variety of dimensions the immoral irrationality of the world in which we live and the need to delimit new paths and begin to walk along them, as Jean did so many times.

San Pablo Etlá, July 2021