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A Voice in the Wilderness
Ivan Illich’s Era Dawns

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Introduction

I dream of an intellectual who destroys proofs and universals, who discovers and reveals, within present day limitations and inertia, weaknesses, openings, lines of force; one that is always changing location. He [sic] doesn’t know precisely where he will be or what he will be thinking tomorrow because he is completely absorbed in the present. (Foucault, cited in Daniel, 1984, p. 29)

Ivan Illich was the first public intellectual with the audacity, courage, and prescience to boldly whip off the moral mantel decently covering the coupling of Education and Development—the two sacred cows sacralized globally more than half a century ago. Principally an historian of the 12th century, Illich remained fully absorbed in the present. To see the present afresh and anew, with “non-modern” eyes, to discover how modern mentality was constructed, he often likened his analytical method to walking backward like a crab toward the 12th century, discovering the historical origins of 20th century certitudes.

Illich’s gaze on our present compelled him to offer a public pedagogy from the margins. Qua public intellectual, Illich marked a radical departure from the establishment’s mainstream public pedagogy. He embraced his marginality: a voice in the wilderness, ignored by the Establishment in the five Development Decades that defined post-World War II public pedagogy.

Reflecting on contemporary predicaments, as experienced with historical hindsight in the sense and sensibility of 12th century cosmovisions, Illich saw through the arrogance of 20th century expectations, hell-bent on some single-minded pursuit of progress. Unique in his 12th century stance for taking stock of “modern times,” Ivan Illich came to be classified as a “hot postmodernist.” Decades after he published them, his piercing, irreverent insights would finally make it into the Oxford Dictionary of Quotations: “In a consumer society, there are inevitably two kinds of slaves: the prisoners of addiction and the prisoners of envy” (cited in Knowles, 2004, p. 810).

Education and Development create a perfect match, Illich declared boldly and courageously, for the most efficient and productive global proliferation of both kinds of contemporary slaves. Other intellectuals of the 1950s and 60s joined the mainstream counterpoint to Illich, enthusiastically singing the gospel of global Education and Development and praising their laudable marriage made in heaven. Standing alone, Illich had the audacity to express his horror with the
progeny produced, that “the bond that constitutes E & D” (as he calls education and development when they are considered as a couple) is becoming, in fact, “an evil of an unrecognized kind…” (Illich, 1984, p. 5).

Only dissident vanguards could hear Illich in the 1960s. Immediately following the end of World War II, the officially legitimate public pedagogy launched globally in President Truman’s inaugural address in 1949 paid homage to global Development. The coupling of Development and Education followed inevitably, “harnessed as the draft animals of so called progress” (Illich, 1984, p. 4).

Illich, however, remained a voice in the wilderness while mainstream public intellectuals joined the global chant, dancing to the promises of the Pied Piper of Progress. The public pedagogy used for that purpose exhibited an amazing effectiveness in manufacturing consent (Herman & Chomsky, 1988) among new national elites in newly independent nation states. A little bit of help, combined with a little bit of arm twisting of new national elites, effectively helped the latest Superpower on the block quickly force the assent of the masses and classes for their survival, even for their own good, to bow in acquiescence before the messiahs of post-WWII public pedagogy.

Almost three decades later, in 1984, Illich observed that many professionals as well as lay people still assumed that the growth of E & D remains the goal; however, “they have learned not to expect Shangri-la after decades of frustration” (p. 5). Social realities imposed by E & D became increasingly difficult to deny (despite professional protestations of developers and educators):

- cost overruns, dropouts, increased social polarization, declining quality and declining value of ever more expensive positional knowledge and commodities, mushrooming bureaucracies, disabling professionalism, rising repression, violence to body and mind, net transfers of privileges, class-specific burden of externalities. (Illich, 1984, p. 6)

Prescient Illich had warned about all these horrors—not perceived in the 1950s and consciously ignored in the 1960s. In the 1980s, Illich sought to debunk E & D even more boldly, reiterating the increasingly evident evil embedded in the social constructions coupling these two for the global pursuit of progress while robustly announcing his hope that the post-WWII E & D coupling need not define an irreversible or inescapable part of every culture’s destiny. Illich’s hopefulness resonated with the articulations of millions of uneducated, illiterate, and under-developed people at the grassroots—in cultural commons, indigenous communities, as well as urban ghettos and slums proliferating across the world. “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?” Illich (1984, p. 12) asked. “Pressed, I would call this project the recovery of commons...At least conceptually, we could move beyond our sacred cows [of E & D]” (p. 12).

This chapter celebrates Ivan Illich’s public pedagogy: first to render naked the horrors and counterproductivity of globalized development and education, and second, to honor grassroots pedagogies sprouting organically from diverse cultural soils during the last 20 years. Resonating with the best of Illich’s hopes, these pedagogies at the grassroots continue creating organic, profound social transformations: the revolution of the new commons.

Illich Calls For Commons: Echoes Heard Beyond the Institutional Wilderness

During the late sixties it has become evident that less than 10 per cent of the human race consumes more than 50 per cent of the world’s resources, and produces 90 per cent of the physical pollution which threatens to extinguish the biosphere. But this is only one aspect of the paradox of present development. During the early seventies it will become equally
clear that welfare institutions have an analogous regressive effect. The international institutionalization of social service, medicine, and education which is generally identified with development has equally overwhelming destructive by-products. We need an alternative program, an alternative both to development and to merely political revolution. Let me call this alternative program either institutional or cultural revolution, because its aim is the transformation of both public and personal reality. (Illich, 1970, p. 180)

From his place of complete marginality vis-à-vis the industrial wilderness of modern institutions (political, economic, or educational), Illich invited friends, co-conspirators, and kindred spirits “to initiate a discussion about the need of constitutional principles which would guarantee an ongoing cultural revolution in a technological society” (Illich, 1970, p. 175). The discussions he generated at CIDOC® produced many pamphlets for circulation and discussion. For several years, its handcrafted publishing house published hundreds of titles. One of these publications, Tools for Conviviality (Illich, 1973), became well known as the most radical declaration of liberation from the menace of E & D of technological societies in their rabid, rapid global metastasis.

When he first called for cultural and institutional revolution, Illich was fully aware that the Second UN Development Decade had just been launched. Still, he continued trusting the courage and wisdom of common people who had not lost their commons or their common sense to the wiles of developers dominating every nation state. His hope resided in people who were already resisting the development enterprise at the margins while struggling to reclaim and protect their own sensible paths of cultural revolution at the grassroots—in their commons.

Today, almost 40 years later, un-maskable climate change, global misery, and injustice finally make evident the price we must pay for the path not taken. Today’s financial meltdown in the United States, viewed from the grassroots, is not just the beginning of an economic recession or depression. It grows and expands as one expression, among many, of cultural destruction, such as those carefully described and anticipated by Illich. These modern facts speak forcefully today—even as in the 1960s Illich spoke out loud, clear, unequivocally, and unmistakably about the violence inherent in the E & D paradigm to 20th century’s mainstream public intellectuals and their dominant pedagogies.

Millions of people at the grassroots, without knowing of or reading Illich’s writings, are mobilizing themselves to stop the horror. Learning to again trust their own cultural noses while laughing anew at the “apocalyptic randiness” (Cayley, 1992, p. 146) of environmental experts, pundits, and politicians declaring the death of the planet though still proclaiming the obsolete slogans of E & D, these millions express everywhere a new awareness. Challenging like never before the powers that be and the dominant institutions and paradigms of global Education and Development, people at the grassroots express their creativity and autonomy, similar to Illich. Though vibrant, alive, and pertinent at the grassroots commons, Illich’s ideas and ideals remain impractical, inert, and dead within the academy. Rather than a call to action that moves out of armchairs and into the streets, Illich’s insights and provocations remain merely academic at the centers of all other mainstream institutions: dead, dormant, and dead ends for policy makers, professionals, and professional leaders alike. The death of Ivan Illich within the Academy need surprise no one—except, perhaps, the acutely apolitical and gullible.

Re-Colonization: Globalization and Neoliberalism Capture Public Pedagogy

Illich confessed that his most radical ideas and ideals were but a footnote to Gandhi. Gandhi had to be both sanctified and assassinated for the unimpeded pursuit of progress heralded by newly independent India’s elite. Illich had to be silenced: his irrelevance established at the centers of all mainstream institutions of developed societies.
Decades before Illich’s birth, Gandhi’s revolution had called into question the Western religion of progress. Gandhi (1938) openly called Western civilization a curable disease. We do not want India’s independence from colonialism to simply nationalize British domination, insisted Gandhi time and again. India’s decolonization makes sense only as *Hind Swaraj* (Indian Home Rule)—sovereignty for Indians, liberated from British colonialism, independence gained from all Western institutions starting with the Western religion of progress. Gandhi urged Indians to continue creating and walking their own paths—offering radical departures from all Western myths of progress, rather than joining the Western dance of destruction, guzzling the earth’s remaining bounty with the speed and efficiency of destructive locusts. Won solely with the force of truth (*satyagraha*), this sovereignty called for courage, clarity, and non-violence (*ahimsa*). Without a single bullet fired and without a single weapon needed, the British Raj ended.

In the first decades of the 20th century, many peoples still under colonial rule or living within former colonies were trying to find and follow their own paths. In Mexico, at the other end of the globe from India, President Cárdenas (1934–1940) reclaimed the spirit of the Mexican Revolution of 1910. He organized his political project through implementing a formidable agrarian reform. Half of the arable land was given to organized peasants during his term; unions were strengthened, and oil exploitation was protected from private profiteering. In defense of this project, it was said:

> We believe that Mexico finds herself in a privileged position to determine her destiny… By observing the effects of the last crisis of the capitalist world, we think that we should be able to use the advantages of the industrial era without having to suffer from its well known short-comings…avoiding the avoidable evils of industrialism, such as urbanism, exploitation of man by man, production for sale instead of production for the satisfaction of human needs, economic insecurity, waste, shabby goods and the mechanization of the workmen…We have dreamt of a Mexico of ejidos (communal land) and small industrial communities, electrified, with sanitation, in which goods will be produced for the purpose of satisfying the needs of the people; in which machinery will be employed to relieve man from heavy toil and not for so called over-production. (Ramón Beteta, quoted in Mosk, 1950, p. 58)

Over-production, American style, however, came to rule the day. To understand the complete co-optation of the postcolonial dreams of common peoples in India, Mexico, and all other newly independent nation states, we are compelled to follow the course of the history of Development and Education: Why did Mexico substitute Cárdenas’ agrarian reform for the Green Revolution? Why did dams become the modern temples of Nehru’s newly independent India? Why did both Mexico and India—like all other nation states—bow obsequiously to their American labeling as *underdeveloped*? Why did they get completely distracted from regenerating their agricultural traditions and strengths in order to play second fiddle in the global race for accelerated industrialization and urbanization?

Raising radical questions when others bowed to the dominant Truths—pedagogical, political, economic, educational, or philosophical—Illich remained a voice in the wilderness at the height of post-WWII recolonialization. What was the new pedagogy that re-colonized the newly de-colonized? Where was this new pedagogy birthed and launched globally? Who were the designers of recolonizing pedagogies? What motivated them? Once more, Illich’s questions and reflections sought stones for stopping Goliath’s terrorization of common people: the world’s two thirds social majorities suffering the Truths of the world’s social minorities.
Recolonization: Superpowers Refining their Colonization Games

Few things have done more harm than the belief on the part of individuals or groups (or tribes or states or nations or churches) that he or she or they are in sole possession of the truth: especially about how to live, what to be and do—and that those who differ from them are not merely mistaken, but wicked or mad: and need restraining or suppressing.

It is a terrible and dangerous arrogance to believe that you alone are right: have a magical eye which sees the truth; and that others cannot be right if they disagree. (Berlin, 2001, p. 12)

In 1945, at the end of WWII, the United States was an amazingly productive machine, producing half of the world’s registered “goods” (Bacevich, 2008). As a universal creditor, the United States was undisputedly at the center of the world. The Bretton Woods Agreements established the new post-war financial system in 1944, with explicit rules for every country on earth but one: the United States, whose currency would become universal reserve. The institutions created in the period, including the United Nations, acknowledged one way or the other the new hegemonic power of the United States.

Yet, victors of WWII, Americans wanted to make entirely explicit their new position as the world’s contemporary superpower. American leaders wanted to consolidate their hegemony and make it permanent. To consolidate its power to launch the American century, the U.S. government conceived its global campaign, its emblem—global development symbolizing peaceful, indisputable American hegemonic power. On January 20, 1949, President Truman’s inaugural address officially launched the new era of development:

We must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas. The old imperialism—exploitation for foreign profit—has no place in our plans. What we envisage is a program of development based on the concepts of democratic fair-dealing. (Truman, 1949, ¶ 53)

Underdevelopment (see Esteva, 1992) was globally birthed. Presented as the emblem of superpower international power, the pedagogy of development took on an unsuspected colonizing virulence. From one day to the next, two billion people became underdeveloped, in desperate need of curing. Development, immediately and universally accepted, represents a very peculiar case of instant pedagogy.

In a real sense, from that moment on, two billion people ceased being what or who they really were, in all their marvelous and abundant diversity. Within minutes, they were mangled and transmogrified into an inverted mirror of others’ reality, a mirror that belittled them, sending them off to the end of the queue, a mirror that totally and unrecognizably redefined their identity, ruthlessly and reductionistically repackaging the fabulous heterogeneity and diversity of the world’s social majorities into the derogatory and dehumanizing categories of a homogenizing and narrow minority.

Truman triumphantly set the stage for the UN Declaration of Human Rights obliging global compulsory education. To be developed, education was a basic need. Education was elevated to nothing more or less than a fundamental human right: both a liberty as well as a welfare right. American education came to be flaunted worldwide by the developed and the over-educated as the universal model for any nation that genuinely sought equality, social justice, development, and democracy for all.

By the late 1960s, once the Alliance for Progress defined the terms of the new pedagogy, the
world became clearly divided into two parts: the developed and the underdeveloped. The doctrine involved in the enterprise was aptly summed up by President Nixon: “This I pledge to you tonight: the nation that went to the moon in peace for all mankind is ready to share its technology in peace with its nearest neighbors” (quoted in Illich, 1970, p. 177).

Using almost the same words as Truman, Nixon’s “pledge” harkened an escalation of Truman’s public pedagogy. No more imperialism—exploitation for foreign profit, only a program “for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas” (Truman, 1949, ¶ 44). This was not hypocrisy or cynicism. This was full, blind faith in their own public pedagogy—manufactured by their own public intellectuals.

Horrified by the secular salvation now working side by side with 500 years of Christian salvation, Illich left the Catholic University of Puerto Rico to quietly launch at the grassroots the most radical decolonizing initiative of the 1960s. He established CIDOC in Cuernavaca, Mexico. Through intercultural documentation, he sought to cleanse agents of their faith in secular salvation and cure evangelizing missionaries hell bent on educating and converting the masses of Latin America to their god-given drive for secular and religious salvation. After publishing Deschooling Society (1971), Illich (1977) took on the task of thinking, writing, and publishing to celebrate peoples’ ways of cultural initiation “in lieu of education.”

Soon after its publication, Illich (1971) recognized that his thesis in Deschooling Society had become highly counterproductive, for despite his hopes in writing it, it had successfully birthed countless projects across the world that proved to be nothing more nor nothing less than alternatives in education. Now Illich sought to undo the mistakes of deschooling society by explaining why education was a “soul shredder” and history’s most insidious project in ethno-cide and culture-cide. For the rest of his years, Illich celebrated worlds where the young could be raised and taught by the elders of their people, honoring ways of teaching and learning that were radical examples of alternatives to education.

Today in 2009, a half-century following Illich’s insights, two-thirds of the peoples of the world still remain underdeveloped as well as under-educated or uneducated. Underdevelopment is a threat that has already been carried out—a life experience of subordination and of being led astray, of discrimination, subjugation, and enslavement. Following the latest fashions of American education means turning a blind eye to the destruction of one’s own languages, food, and traditions of cultural initiation into one’s own unique and vibrantly diverse ways of living. It also means ignoring the brute fact that no underdeveloped country in Africa, Asia, or Latin America will ever be able to satisfy the demand manufactured for achieving globally the American Dream through its educational system.

**Decolonization: Illich Initiates the Archeology of Development and Education**

The compulsion to do good is an innate American trait. Only North Americans seem to believe that they always should, may, and actually can choose somebody with whom to share their blessings. Ultimately this attitude leads to bombing people into the acceptance of gifts. (Illich, 1970, p. 19)

A few months after 9/11, Newsweek published a cartoon of American aid packets falling from the sky over Afghanistan. Watching the miniscule packets of food flying down alongside a super generous abundance of bombs from Yankee aircrafts, an Afghani mother cautions her child about catching only the food and not getting caught by the bombs. Food and bombs are the
invariable combinations in the international American aid effort globally and graphically presented in the cartoon. This contemporary cartoon succinctly captures Illich’s insights about all Development Aid off-loaded to develop the underdeveloped since Truman’s Inauguration project for global development.

Illich wrote, “Violence: A Mirror for Americans” (Illich, 1970) to express the fears he had earlier revealed to resistors organizing the march on the Pentagon. Illich feared the end of the war in Vietnam. Would it permit the hawks and doves of the Vietnam War to unite in a destructive “war on poverty” conjointly waged upon the Third World? Illich dared express his most radical and profound fears. Sadly, what prescient Illich feared came to be realized soon enough: Vietnam War’s hawks and doves united in common cause, preaching the new catechism of the 1960s and waging their new global war—the era of Development through education and other economic institutions. This war proved to be the most counterproductive.

In 1960, the rich countries were 20 times richer than the poor countries. In 1980, they emerged 46 times richer (Sachs, 1992, p. 3). Development demonstrated itself as best business for developed countries and extremely counterproductive for the underdeveloped (e.g., environmental degradation, social polarization, cultural devastation). The underdeveloped would never catch up with the rich. However, the social majorities soon had a new awareness. With Illich, the underdeveloped soon recognized the economic and ecological unfeasibility of developers’ and educators’ universal definition of the good life—a definition associated with the American Dream. Ivan Illich’s decades-old prediction—that it was economically and ecologically unsustainable for every man and woman on earth to adopt the same per capita consumption of North Americans, with their basic needs for a family car, their university diplomas—became impossible to deny.

The American Development paradigm was MAD: mutual assured destruction to all life on earth. To avoid this global path of mad destruction, people could continue following the path of their cultures, customs, and elders, their own definitions of the good life—feasible, sustainable, and sensible—long celebrated by the debunker of the American Dream, the “mad man” ridiculed for writing Deschooling Society.

Development thus became a frayed flag by the end of the 1980s. Around the world, seminars and conferences were organized for reflecting on the post-development age. The 1980s were officially considered the decade lost for development in Latin America. A new awareness started to emerge at the grassroots. Beyond development, what? Ivan Illich had already invited several public intellectuals and friends across the world for conversations essential for answering this simple, glaring, and obvious question of the 1980s. Two distinct answers inevitably came to be heard. From the Centers of Development, the words globalization and neoliberalism suddenly defined a new catechism, the new pedagogy. From the margins came resistance to economic and educational catechisms that meant destruction to ways of life that allowed the two thirds majorities to survive and flourish in the thick of having the Fourth World War of Development waged upon them.

Globalization and neoliberalism failed to fool this time. The “masses” who had innocently succumbed to Global Development half a century earlier had grown savvy and street smart when pressed to bow once more to the public pedagogy of professionals and experts. Their genius in inventing diverse forms of resistance across the world, we, following Esteva and Prakash (1998), have called grassroots postmodernism.

Among the innumerable examples of grassroots postmodernists, the Zapatistas stand out for their bold theorizing and courageous initiatives (Prakash & Esteva, 1998). Over two decades ago, the Zapatistas declared on the very day neoliberalism became official pedagogy in Mexico, that
At the same time as neoliberalism carries out its world war, all over the world groups of those who will not conform take shape, nuclei of rebels. The empire of financial pockets confront the rebellion of the pockets of resistance.

Yes, pockets. Of all sizes, of all colors, of the most varied forms. Their only similarity is their resistance to the “new world order” and the crime against humanity that the neoliberal war carries out. (Marcos, 1997, Section 9, ¶ 2–3)

A new pedagogy, this time coming from below, at the grassroots, began to effectively challenge the dominant paradigm and accelerate the crisis of the dominant economic and political system. The financial meltdown determined the winner of the 2008 U.S. presidential election while the depth and reach of this crisis continues to be the object of intense debate. But there is almost universal consensus that the American era has ended: its new, greater hegemonic power is no longer present. To be primus inter pares is the best it can aspire to be. New books on de-globalization, a multilateral world, and Bretton Woods II are now being written and published. But how did the building’s foundation begin to crack?

One Story of Emancipation at the Grassroots: Zapatista Public Pedagogy

“Hope is [the] rejection of conformity and defeat” (The Zapatistas, 1998, p. 13). Its name is also dignity.

Dignity is that nation without nationality, that rainbow that is also a bridge, that murmur of the heart no matter what blood lives it, that rebel irreverence that mocks borders, customs, and wars. (The Zapatistas, 1998, p. 13)

Behind our black mask, behind our armed voice, behind our unnamable name, behind what you see of us, behind this, we are you. Behind this, we are the same simple and ordinary men and women who are repeated in all races, painted in all colors, speak in all languages, and live in all places. Behind this, we are the same forgotten men and women, the same excluded, the same intolerated, the same persecuted, the same as you. Behind this, we are you. (The Zapatistas, 1998, p. 24)

On January 1, 1994, the Zapatista uprising featured on TV screens across the world a few hours after NAFTA—the North American Free Trade Agreement between Mexico, the United States, and Canada—came into force. Calling themselves Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN), thousands of Maya armed with machetes, clubs, and a few guns occupied seven of the main towns in Chiapas, Mexico’s province bordering Guatemala. Declaring war on the Mexican government, they expressed their hope for radical political transformation: for a democracy in which they could reclaim their commons and regenerate their own forms of governance while recovering their own cultural arts of living and dying. Their slogan for autonomy—“¡Basta! Enough!”—continues to be embraced by grassroots liberation movements across the world.

Millions of Mexicanos stormed the streets in solidarity following January 1, 1994. “You are not alone,” millions affirmed, asking for a ceasefire. Since January 12, 1994, the Zapatistas have dutifully respected this request, and the public pressure of millions in solidarity with them profoundly and irrevocably altered democracy in Mexico. Worldwide, no contemporary political or social movement had attracted more attention than the Zapatistas. In 2005, Wallerstein observed that the Zapatista rebellion “has been the most important social movement in the world, the
barometer and alarm clock for other anti-system movements around the world” (Wallerstein, 2005, ¶ 1). What kind of public, grassroots pedagogy is this?

The U.S. and Mexican governments described the Zapatistas as “Internet guerrillas” to disqualify the group. Never guerrillas (i.e., Che Guevara’s self-styled fish swimming in the sea of people), the Zapatistas were nothing less than the sea: hundreds of communities declaring war upon the corrupt and undemocratic Mexican government. A few days after the uprising, a librarian from California discovered their communiqués online. Autonomously translating and circulating them in cyberspace, she launched a new kind of peoples’ power and pedagogy: decentralized and creative, with thousands of people using the World Wide Web to disseminate the Zapatista communiqués, strengthened with their own reflections, experiences, and stories of radical transformation.

This kind of public attention, however, does not reflect appropriately the importance and vitality of the movement as effective and powerful grassroots public pedagogy. In Mexico, the Zapatistas have convened and inspired massive mobilizations, which reached their peak on March 2001, when 40 million Mexicans (40% of the population) attended the meetings with the Zapatista commanders, and walked to Mexico City to present their views to the Congress. In 2006, when the Zapatistas organized a national and international consultation, in order to define what the people wanted them to do (something peculiar in itself: a revolutionary group asking the people for direction and meaning?), three million people expressed their opinion through ballot boxes, established by the people themselves in a decentralized way while people from more than 100 countries also organized themselves to present their position. Many of the anti-systemic movements, after Seattle, recognize the Zapatistas as the source of inspiration and the detonator of those mobilizations.

The final evidence of the impact of the Zapatista pedagogy continues to be found in the Zapatista presence in communities and neighborhoods in Mexico and the rest of the world. But it has become impossible to appreciate their presence: there is no way to fully measure their impact. The important point is that the search always produces something—wherever one explores, in any country on earth, one can find Zapatista traces. No one will seriously attribute only to the Zapatistas the fall in 2000 of the oldest authoritarian regime in the world (defeat of the dominant political party Partido Revolucionario Institucional or PRI in Mexico) or the articulation of the amazing transnational networks that emerged in the world in the course of the last 10 years. But only total blindness can deny their weight in those processes.

What kind of pedagogy is this? The Zapatistas offer the most radical challenge in words and deeds to every aspect of contemporary economic society (capitalism), the nation-state, formal democracy, and all modern institutions. They also render obsolete conventional social and political movements that seek power that is exerted from above. Radically reconstructing the world at the grassroots, they reveal the illusory image of top down power. Solnit (2004) observes,

Our movements are trying to create a politics that challenges all the certainties of traditional leftist politics, not by replacing them with new ones, but by dissolving any notion that we have answers, plans or strategies that are watertight or universal. In fact, our strategies must be more like water itself, undermining everything that is fixed, hard and rigid with fluidity, constant movement and evolution…When we are asked how are we going to build a new world, our answer is: “We don’t know, but let’s build it together.” (p. 105)

The Zapatistas clarify that they are mere rebels. They celebrate and honor millions of common men and women—both inspired by and inspiring the Zapatistas—as the radical revolutionaries
whose hope is transforming their communities at the grassroots across the world. Together, they have already established the foundations of what can be called the first social revolution of the 21st century: the revolution of the new commons (Esteva, 1998; Esteva & Prakash, 1998). In their movement we see the revolutionary emancipation that Illich’s pedagogy imagined.

Epimetheus Reborn: Ourselves, Our Commons, and Commonsense Regenerated

Some fortuitous coincidence will render publicly obvious the structural contradictions between stated purposes and effective results in our major institutions. People will suddenly find obvious what is now evident to only a few: that the organization of the entire economy toward the “better” life has become the major enemy of the “good” life. Like other widely shared insights, this one will have the potential of turning public imagination inside out. Large institutions can quite suddenly lose their respectability, their legitimacy, and their reputation for 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. (Illich, 1973, p. 103)

The financial meltdown of 2008 was anticipated by Illich in 1973. From one day to the next, people lost confidence in the dominant institutions and the administrators of the crisis. President Bush reached the end of his term with the lowest level of trust and popularity of any president in the history of the United States. In Mexico, there are two presidents (the legal and the legitimate), but no real government of the society. Rather than exceptions, these cases seem to be the rule.

Illich early warned both people and their officials about the counter-productivity of thinking that it is possible to address the difficulties with the usual tools: for example, applying the power of the government to nationalize banks or to bail out institutions, following the faith of deregulation.

No remedy seems to work, but we can still find resources to support every remedy proposed. Governments think they can deal with the breakdown of utilities, the disruption of the educational system, intolerable transportation, the chaos of the judicial process, the violent disaffection of the young. Each is dealt with as a separate phenomenon, each is explained by a different report, each calls for a new tax and a new program. Squabbles about alternative remedies give credibility to both…. Since each of the proposed remedies appeals to some, the usual solution is an attempt to try both. The result is a further effort to make the pie grow, and to forget that it is a pie in the sky. (Illich, 1973, pp. 103–104)

Beyond a bigger pie, Illich’s hope is captured in the Zapatista experience within the areas where they have governed autonomously for the last 15 years. Ordinary men and women have been performing all the functions of self-government, recognized by their communities as their temporary representatives. People take turns to serve in those positions: they thus have credible authority. They continue resisting bureaucracy in the organization of their daily lives. Their actions nourish their confidence in their capacity to transform the present. The whole experience also resembles that of the Paris Commune, explicitly celebrated by Marx in The Civil War in France (Marx, 1970).

“Convivially used procedure guarantees that an institutional revolution will remain a tool whose goals emerge as they are enacted,” wrote Illich (1973, p. 106). The Zapatistas openly inverted the traditional revolutionary process by rejecting the separation between ends and means, and recognizing, instead, as Illich said, that practice gives rise to the ends sought.
We don’t believe that the ends justify the means. Finally we think the means are the end. We construct our objective at the same time that we construct the means by which we go on struggling. In that sense, the value we give to the spoken word, to honesty and to sincerity, is great, even though at times we may err ingenuously. (Subcomandante Marcos, in an interview with García Márquez, March 2001, reproduced in Lopes, 2004, p. 149)

Illich based his anticipation on his awareness that the modern nation-state had been converted into a conglomerate of private entities, formed by large national and international private corporations and by large bureaucratized unions. Periodically, political parties convene all the shareholders to elect a new board. When the institutions that form the nation-state enter into a crisis, as they have now, a path is opened for reconstructing society—in order to reconstitute it.

The loss of legitimacy of the state as a holding corporation does not destroy, but reasserts, the need for constitutional procedure. The loss of confidence in parties that have become stockholders’ factions brings out the importance of adversary procedures in politics. (Illich, 1973, p. 109)

Illich considered the possibility of a sudden meltdown creating that scenario. Instead, junctures presented themselves that prolonged the agony of the dominant regime. In his conversations with David Cayley (1992), Illich pointed out that people can see what scientists and administrators cannot.

Daily it becomes more and more clear that we are now living the situation that Illich foresaw, in financial, institutional, and other catastrophes. It is necessary to transform these increasingly general catastrophes, covering all spheres of reality—from the planetary environment to the privacy of every home—all submitting to growing violence. Might we imagine these crises as an opportunity for transformation? Illich’s reflections turn more and more to searching for sources of hope in the age of despair.

When hope is destroyed, grief is like your own death. Almost 40 years ago, towards the end of Deschooling Society, Ivan Illich wrote: “The Promethean ethos has now eclipsed hope. Survival of the human race depends on [hope’s] rediscovery as a social force” (Illich, 1971, p. 106). Prometheus symbolized the human hubris and technological arrogance of seeking to steal the gods’ fire, of wresting the cosmos out of the hands of god into a “cosmos in the hands of man” (Cayley, 1992, p. 252). This wresting replaced hope with uncontrollable modern expectations. Prometheus’s brother, Epimetheus, escaped his brother’s folly by embracing humility instead of the hubris of seeking to possess what belongs to the gods. Wedded to humility and hindsight, he married Pan-Dora, the All-Giver. She opened her amphora that freed all social ills to fly away. The lid of her amphora was closed shut, however, before hope also vanished.

In our era, Promethean ethos and hubris threaten to destroy the world conceived, constructed, and engineered as a cosmos in the hands of man. The endless expectations it generates doom humans to unending demands for consumption, for needs that know no limits. Imagining the rebirth of Epimetheus, Illich nourishes the virtue of hope and humility—conscious of the cosmos held in the hands of god.

Most people learn most of the time when they do whatever they enjoy; most people are curious and want to give meaning to whatever they come in contact with; and most people are capable of personal, intimate intercourse with others unless they are stupefied by inhuman work or turned off by schooling. (Illich, 1977, p. 85)
Common people are increasingly aware of this. As the young Barack Obama recalled, his grandfather already knew it. What did he call college? “An advanced degree in compromise”:

Understand something, boy. You’re not going to college to get educated. You’re going there to get trained. They’ll train you to want what you don’t need. They’ll train you to manipulate words so they don’t mean anything anymore. They’ll train you to forget what is that you already know. They’ll train you so good, you’ll start believing what they tell you about equal opportunity and the American way and all that shit. (Obama, 2004, p. 97)

As Illich’s public pedagogy anticipated, ordinary men and women, particularly among the marginalized majorities of the world, are today the main source of hope. While the major institutions constructed and planned by social engineers, experts, and professionals are falling apart, ordinary people are reclaiming and regenerating their commons. They are taking radical initiatives to live today a convivial life.

In 1992, in preparation for the Earth Summit, the team of *The Ecologist*, the prestigious British journal that has become the bible for the environmentalist, traveled around the world to get a first-hand picture of what common people were doing given the intrusions of the global economy into every country. *Whose Common Future? Reclaiming the Commons* (*The Ecologist*, 1993), the title of the book in which they presented their findings, appropriately expressed the situation. They found that “for the vast majority of humanity, the commons is an everyday reality” (p. 7):

The erosion of the global economy, far from being a disaster, ushers in a new era of opportunities—the opportunity to live with dignity, the opportunity for communities to define their own priorities and identities, to restore what development has destroyed and to enjoy lives of increased variety and richness. (*The Ecologist*, 1993, p. 195)

Common people at the grassroots are in fact making their lives today—as Illich would say—the shape of tomorrow’s future or of “rivers north of the future” (as the book is titled, Cayley, 2005). Their initiatives are expressions of hope. And hope, as Vaclav Havel (1990) once said, “is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out” (pp. 181–182).

**Notes**

1. “Pedagogy” is a word that Illich, we suspect, would have resisted using in all the different contexts and diverse ways he “professed” and celebrated teaching and learning for conviviality and community, authenticity and awareness. Co-opted by pedagogues, professions, professionals—in the reign of their institutions and bureaucracies—Illich mourned the lost vitality and aliveness of teaching and learning, once transmogrified into official curricula and pedagogies. “Pedagogy” resisted by Illich makes sense given the stance his studies took him to against all the words associated with the “Development Era.”

2. Please see “Introduction” (Sachs, 1992) for a comprehensive overview of the Development Decades.

3. We elaborate on this in the following sections of this chapter. For further elaborations, see Prakash and Esteva, 1998).

4. CIDOC or the Center for Intercultural Documentation (Centro Intercultural de Documentación) was founded in 1961 by Illich and Valentina Borremans at Cuernavaca, Mexico. Illich’s intention for this “alternative university” (Illich in Cayley, 1992, p. 80) was to provide cheap language instruction for new recruits in Kennedy’s Alliance for Progress, and the Catholic clergy and laity following the Church’s mandate sending 10% of its American clergy to Latin America. Illich’s hope: to stem the tide of this new crusade for Western-style development.

5. Asked to define civilization, Gandhi (1938) replied, “Civilization is not an incurable disease, but it should never be forgotten that the English people are at present afflicted by it” (p. 34).
6. Mosk (1950) writes, “No better expression of his (President Cárdenas) ideal can be asked for than the following quotation from an address by one of the officials of his administration (Ramón Beteta), delivered at the Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Virginia in July, 1935” (p. 50).

7. Illich was no longer alone in expressing his horror of American aid worldwide. In 1971, Frances Moore Lappe’s *Diet for a Small Planet* detailed the violence of American aid boldly and courageously.


References


