**Friendship, Hope and Surprise – the Keys for the New Era**

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No face. No contact. No interaction with others, even the loved ones: they can contaminate you, even kill you, by sharing their covid 19.

Confinement. Children plugged into the screen for hours, attending classes of a universal curriculum increasingly irrelevant for their lives.

Can we still call this a human society, a humane society?

Systematic destruction of Mother Earth.

Increasing violence and dismantling of the social fabric and the state of law, with increasing, illegal control on people’s lives, becomes the normal condition everywhere...

In Mexico, one hundred people are assassinated every day and immense areas have remained for years under criminal control. It has become increasingly difficult to draw a line between the world of the institutions and the world of crime.

Evident in the past year are the extremes of national and global inequities exacerbated by Covid-19. Having lost jobs or income sources, millions were forced to reinvent themselves to survive.

The Lancet was right. We are not suffering a pandemic. Since 2019 it warned that we are before a syndemic, the concurrent disease clusters and generalized chronic conditions, emerging under health disparity and caused by poverty, stress and structural violence. This approach departs from the biomedical approach isolating and treating diseases as distinct entities, separated from other diseases and social conditions, as has been done with covid 19.

The Guardian was right. We are not before climate change or global warming. We are before a climate collapse. The climate we had is gone. We know nothing about the emerging climate. We don’t know if it will be compatible with human life.

The socio-political collapse is even worst. All the institutions defining our era are in open decadence, substituted by a dispositive that in many senses is the opposite of what they were. Under these conditions, confusion, uncertainty and suffering among millions of people, and the disruption, deterioration, or destruction of living conditions constitute the real “new normal.”

The entire world is embroiled in the “long emergency”.

Multiple socio-economic and political crises beginning in the 1990s and exploding in 2008 produced unbearable conditions for millions of people around the world. In the face of converging catastrophes, the elite minority scramble to secure their privileges, while the majority of people experience the devastating effects of the current moment.

Hunger, violence, incarceration, wealth/income gaps, intractable wars, and the collapse of democratic norms and institutions further demonstrate how attempts to address these problems via escalation of past solutions are doomed at the outset.

Numerous scholars argue that the world has arrived at a “point of no return.”

I am sorry for using all this time to bring to your attention the horror we all know pretty well. I just wanted to acknowledge it and to underline that it is the expression of a dying era. Like always, the dying regime, patriarchal, capitalist and “democratic”, uses all its remaining forces and resources to pretend it has more power than ever, that it is alive and well and that soon we will be back to better conditions. Both prosperity and freedom for everyone will be restored…or established for the first time.

Allow me now to talk a little more about that dying era.

Despite capitalism’s global vocation, expressed in all forms of colonialism and imperialism, the nation-state was always the main arena enabling capitalist expansion. In the latter part of the 20th century, however, national borders increasingly posed an obstacle. Macro-national structures like the European Union, designed for the free movement of capital and commodities, did not solve the problem. Consequently, neoliberal globalization began to erode the substance of the nation-state. The main function of the nation-state’s governments — namely the administration of the national economy — became impossible, with all economies being exposed to transnational movements beyond the control of individual nations. While national rituals and nation-states themselves still persist as points of reference, their raison d’être and the material substance giving them reality have disappeared.

The progressive dissolution of the “democratic nation-state” is also a consequence of the fact that capitalism has come up against its own internal limits. Since the 1970s, the so-called “neoliberal revolution” has brought about political, economic and technological changes that have dismantled, at a global level, the social advances accumulated over 200 years of worker struggle. The repercussions are evident everywhere: dwindling employment levels, lower salaries, reduced fringe benefits and deteriorating public services.

Some countries and regions are more severely affected than others. Unprecedented levels of inequality have been created: worldwide, 1% of the population own more wealth than the other 99% combined, and fewer than 30 individuals hold more wealth between them than almost four billion of the world’s poorest people.

Most of what is produced in the world today still has a capitalist character, but capital can no longer resort to the mechanism that drives it, namely the investment of profits in the expansion of production by purchasing labor and balancing every labor-reducing increase in productivity with an equivalent increase in production. For these and other reasons, the worldwide reproduction of the capitalist system is no longer feasible. Capitalism’s evolution has, in effect, killed the goose that laid the golden eggs.

In 1995, at a meeting of the State of the World Forum in San Francisco, economic and political leaders like Mikhail Gorbachev, George Bush, Margaret Thatcher, Václav Havel, Bill Gates and Ted Turner began to talk about a 20:80 world, namely the idea that once the technological revolution is complete, only 20% of the population will be necessary for production. In reality, it appears that a new social class has been created: disposable human beings, sometimes described as The Precariat. In the past, the unemployed fulfilled a certain function for capital. They were its industrial reserve army. Now, capital has no use for this new class. Political and economic leaders are continually redefining the “surplus population”, incorporating ever more new groups of expendable humans.

Barbarism has become the norm. Speculation, dispossession and compulsive destruction are replacing production as a source of accumulation of wealth and power. The democratic façade is no longer useful. Of the old design of the nation-state, only the dispositive for direct and indirect control of the population remain. The use of new technologies may usher in the extension of such oppressive control to previously unimaginable aspects and spheres of daily life.

One pillar of the “democratic” nation-state — the “rule of law” — was the culmination of 200 years of struggle for civil rights and democratic freedoms. Today, it is being replaced by a declared or undeclared state of exception (emergency). Everywhere, new laws are being used to normalize illegality and impunity for ever greater numbers of crimes; Mexico and the US are good examples of this general condition. Instead of the rule ***OF*** law — common norms properly enforced — we are increasingly under the rule ***BY*** law.

The dominant, irresponsible forms of production and consumption have wrought environmental destruction tantamount to extreme abuses of the most basic common sense. In the wake of rapid technological, environmental and social changes, new forms of political domination are emerging. Political leaders with an open anti-democratic vocation and even fascist propensities are currently being elected or re-elected, or are at least ascendant.

Increasingly, people cleave desperately to fundamentalisms — spiritual, religious, or political — even as the ideas and institutions in which they trusted dissolve before their disbelieving eyes. “Democracy” is being “democratically” dismantled almost everywhere.

The 21st century is now characterized by the proliferation of discontent, even in the most unexpected places. No space of social reality is immune. Even those who have concentrated an obscene proportion of wealth in their hands recognize the instability and dangers inherent in the current state of affairs.

In my view, all this is but he expression of the current transition and I want to talk about the world emerging in the womb in the old, about the new era.

25 years ago, Ivan Illich observed that friendship can no longer flower out of political life. “I do believe –he said- that if there is something like a political life to remain for us in the world of technology –then it begins with friendship.” I want to assume seriously this observation and even more: I want to suggest that friendship is at the very center of the path guiding us to the new world, and allowing us to escape from the dying era.

What we need to do, said Illich, is “to cultivate disciplined, self-denying, careful, tasteful friendships.” Perhaps, he added, “here we can find what the good is.” This is the central point, because to find what the good is, the common good, is the very definition of politics. It is the political life still open to us. Illich added: “This goes beyond anything which people usually talk about, saying each one is responsible for the friendships he/she can develop, because society will only be as good as the political result of these friendships.”

Illich was a man of action, a political man, and we can thus understand how and why friendship became for him his sin, his obsession, the center of his life. And he knew very well how to be friends. I would like to tell a story of one of his friendships that I find particularly pertinent for the current moment, for our predicament, and about the new world.

To be acquainted with Latin America, Illich looked for the advice of the bishop Dom Helder Cámara in Brazil. Every day, Dom Helder gave to Ivan one book of a Brazilian author and the next day he introduced the author to him. That is how Illich met Freire and they became friends from the very first day. Dom Helder also told Ivan that to know Latin America he needed to walk it. He walked the favelas of Río with Freire. And later he walked, alone, from Santiago de Chile to Caracas, in Venezuela, just to know us, the people in this area of the world.

Years later, when Freire was put in jail by the Brazilian dictatorship, Illich used all his political influence to get him out of jail, and bring him to his center, the CIDOC, in Cuernavaca, Mexico. He translated and published there Freire’s first books. In some editions of *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* you can still find an Illich sentence: “Here you have a really revolutionary pedagogy”. They had many things in common. They shared the critique of what Freire called the “banking education” and capitalism. Both of them wanted a profound social and political change. But they also had profound differences and soon parted ways.

Freire dedicated his life to implement his ideas, promoting literacy campaigns and popular education. He was not addressing the masses but a group of mediators who will use concientization to educate the masses in their own liberation. His popular educators were soon everywhere and became particularly prominent in Latin America.

Ivan parted ways with Freire when he “moved from the criticism of schooling to the criticism of what *education* does to a society, namely, foster the belief that people have to be helped to gain insights into reality, and have to be helped to prepare for existence or for living” (Cayley 1992, 206). He thus focused on the social conditions in which education may appear as a need, as a means for survival, as the only way to become a legitimate citizen.

He was asking himself what kind of society wants to educate its members in the same way. He knew the answer. The modern society was the first that wanted to shape all its members in a certain way. What we call education, in the modern era, was born with capitalism and for the same purpose.

Ivan dedicated his life and work to dismantle the dominant regime. He knew pretty well its patriarchal nature and the need to dismantle the economic society, capitalist or socialist, and to also dismantle the nation-state, the political form of capitalism, supposedly democratic. He wrote against concientization, about the mediators, even against the magnificent and very popular Freirean educators. For the change, he was not appealing to a leader, a vanguard, a party, or any kind of mediator, but to the people themselves, ordinary men and women, at the grassroots. He assumed that they will create coalitions of discontents.

In spite of that increasing divergence, Illich cultivated his friendship with Freire with discipline and care, a tasteful friendship, until Freire’s death. Here I find a very important lesson for those fighting among them all the time, even for marginal differences, and creating separation and division, particularly in groups in the left. In this case, Illich and Freire were openly militating in opposite trenches in the war against capitalism and the dominant regime. While Freire, as I said, was involved in literacy campaigns, to bring the alphabet to the masses, and tried to apply his “revolutionary pedagogy” everywhere, to transform public and private education, Illich was openly and courageously struggling against both literacy and education. But they remained good friends.

Ten years after the publication of *Deschooling Society*, the most famous of Illich books and the least understood, he confessed that he had been barking at the wrong tree, that at the end of the twenty century the whole society was educating its members in a certain way, formatting them to become subsystems in a system, in the society of control. He was thus struggling against all forms of education, not only the school. And against the whole structure behind education.

I would like to reflect on these points, that in my view are central to open ourselves to the new world.

Literacy campaigns, as well as the programmed teaching of how to learn and write in the school, generate three forms of radical disqualification.

First of all, literacy disqualifies at least a billion people on Earth, the illiterate adults, many of which have often assumed their own inferiority because they lack the specific ability of reading and writing. One can often hear a very wise peasant saying that perhaps what he is saying is totally wrong, because he does not know how to read and write and has no school. The role attributed to literacy in the society creates a damaging form of illegitimate hierarchy.

Literacy also disqualifies reading. The fact that it is imposed, often in very inadequate conditions, provokes that people abandon reading as soon as they can. According to UNESCO, a person can be called a reader if he or she reads more that five books per year. In no country of the world the proportion of ‘readers’ is more that 20% of the population, not even in countries with 99% of literacy or in countries like India, Thailand and China, that have the highest number of hours of reading per week. Many studies have shown that those who learned freely how to read, by their own will, love to do it and usually read many books per year.

Literacy radically disqualifies oral civilizations and devalues their way of thinking, remembering or living, which means not only to disqualify many people still living in the oral civilizations that survive, against all odds, but also devalue its contributions to the understanding of the world and to define what is a good life.

We currently have in Mexico magnificent examples of what happens with children and adults that learn to read and write in freedom, for the joy of it, not for any external imposition. Many of us are openly opposing all forms of literacy, particularly for children.

We are also resisting all forms of education, inside and outside public or private institutions. The school is a dispositive that clearly spoils the spontaneous behavior of children and their opportunities to grow and learn in freedom. There is no system more despotic that the classroom, where the teacher has the power and the truth and supposedly does everything for the benefit of the students he or she controls. That is how the fascism in us all is created, the fascism denounced by Foucault when he wrote about the one “that is in our heads and in our everyday behavior, the fascisms that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploit us.”

There is something more: education castrates our imagination, making almost impossible to think a social organization without hierarchy, without a structure of command and control – that is exactly the kind of organization we need now, to really care for life and survive, something that is almost a definition of the new world, which should be constructed beyond any form of patriarchy.

In the case of children, we are explicitly for the disciplined cultivation of their passion to learn, that they have since they are babies, and to open for them opportunities to discover what they want to learn. We are trying to recuperate all forms and traditions of apprenticeship and the conditions for all people, children and adults, to learn in freedom by doing what they want to learn – which is, by the way, how we all learned most of what we do in our daily life.

What we need to do, said Illich, is “to cultivate disciplined, self-denying, careful, tasteful friendships.” We can construct with them the alternatives to the powers oppressing us. In my view, that is exactly what is happening and becomes a solid source of hope. And it is happening in a convivial climate of friendship.

There is today an extended search for alternative ways of learning. What the governments imposed in the name of Covid 19 allowed the parents to experience directly the school setting. Many of them could no longer accept that form of oppression for their children. Resistance similar to that opposing the establishment of the school system started to proliferate. A million students abandoned the school in Mexico, during the last year, with the support of their parents. Old kinds of learning practices are being adopted everywhere. In many cases, groups of friends come together to conceive and implement the alternatives.

In the public system of education in Oaxaca, in the south of Mexico, where I live, a courageous struggle of the teachers got from the educational authorities permission for an experiment in a number of public schools. When the children arrive for the first day of classes in high school, the teachers tell them that there will not be classes, classroom, disciplines, or grades or other evaluations. With two to five friends they should conceive one or several projects to develop by themselves in the course of the next three years. They can talk with their parents, the elders, the authorities in the community, to confirm the communal value of the projects, and then develop them. The teachers will have two functions: to protect the children from any educational inspector approaching the school, who will not be allowed to talk with them, and to offer them some advice and support if they cannot solve some aspects of their projects.

The results of this experiment are very impressive, particularly by rooting their children in their own places, which is exactly the opposite to what the school was doing to them: uprooting them, creating the desire to abandon their communities for an illusory improvement in the cities or other places.

Years ago, we started to observe in villages and *barrios*, particularly among Indigenous peoples, a radical reaction against education and schools. A few of them closed their schools and expelled their teachers. Most of them avoided this type of political conflict and started instead to just by-pass the school, while reclaiming and regenerating the conditions in which people traditionally learned in their own ways.

They came to this point after a long experience and for many years they resisted the school. In 1954, the UNESCO complained that the main obstacle to education was the indifference of parents to sending their children to school. Fifteen years later, they had to notice that the demand for schooling exceeded the number of available classrooms by seven times. The UNESCO campaign was very successful: the parents were educated in the need to send the children to the school, only to find that there were not enough schools and teachers. No Latin American country has been able since then to satisfy the demand for education. More and more the people suffered the damages of schooling their children and participated in all kind of efforts to reform, widen or improve the system. And finally many of them said *¡Basta,* Enough! like the Zapatistas.

They know very well what is happening. Benjamín Maldonado, an anthropologist, verified it. Using a variety of tests, he compared children going to school with those out of school. The latter knew more about everything, except the national anthem... And those going to school looked down on their communities and cultures, and had subordinated their minds and hearts to the authority of the teacher. “The Indigenous school as a path towards ignorance” is the title of Maldonado’s report (1988).

In fact, the people in the villages know very well that school prevents their children from learning what is needed to continue living in their communities, contributing to their common flourishing, and that of their soils, their places. And it does not offer them an appropriate preparation for life or work out of the community. They are no longer delegating their children’s learning to the school.

True, many of them don’t dare as yet to take their children out of primary school. They don’t want to deprive them of the school diploma, a required passport in the modern society, whose lack is a continual source of discrimination and humiliation. But even those still sending their children to school, in our communities, have now many ways of damage control, both supporting their children in active resistance at school and creating for them alternative opportunities to learn whatever they have a passion or talent for.

We are increasingly convinced that radically de-schooling the world can be today the most important change than anyone can conceive for a new society. It implies a complete reorganization of our lives. I am not suggesting to close all the schools tomorrow morning, which is obviously impossible and may become counterproductive. The most important point is to deschool ourselves, our minds, and then begin the appropriate reorganization of the society. We are convinced that education is the very foundation of the current society and its oppression. To escape from it requires to dismantle such foundation. It is a pre-condition for a real change, for the construction of the new society.

What about the teachers? There are many people who have dedicated their whole live to teaching, with love, care and commitment. Are they doomed? In my view, they are doomed by the system. They are no longer useful for the purpose of shaping the people in a certain way. They may be put in the category of dispensable humans. Most universities and schools are already feeling the reduction of budgets and the experiment of 2020 created the possibility of disposing of the teachers. Like millions of people, the teachers may try to reinvent themselves…and they can make immense contributions for the needed changes. If they begin to abandon the curriculum and the obsession of ‘transferring’ certain knowledge and abilities to the children and youth; if they construct an alliance with them to organize ways to learn in freedom and create apprenticeships; if they assume themselves as committed actors of a transformation that substitute nouns creating dependence –like education or health- for verbs relying on autonomous agency –learn, heal-, they can become one of the best pillars of a peaceful transition.

It seems to be a common experience that we learn better when nobody is teaching us. We learn better from a master when he or she is not teaching us. We can observe this in every baby and in our own experience. Our vital competence comes from learning by doing, without any kind of teaching… It seems easy and accessible for everyone to escape from education in that very sense.

We have learned, with the Zapatistas, that while changing the world is very difficult, perhaps impossible, it is possible to create a whole new world. That is exactly what the Zapatistas are doing in the south of Mexico. How can we create our own new world, at our own, small human scale? How can we deschool our lives and those of our children in this real world, where the school still dominates minds, hearts and institutions? Friendship is a central component of the answer.

Real freedom is of course a fundamental condition for friendship to flourish. But not freedom in the abstract or in political bodies. You can befriend someone in jail or a concentration camp. Also in school. But there should not be strings attached to the relationship between would-be friends. No conditions imposed. No rules or restrictions.

At the end of *Deschooling Society,* where he elaborates on his not very smart proposals, Ivan wrote:

What characterizes the true master-disciple relationship is its priceless character. Aristotle speaks of it as a “moral type of friendship, which is not in fixed terms: it makes a gift, or does whatever it does, as to a friend”. Thomas Aquinas says of this kind of teaching that inevitably it is an act of love and mercy. This kind of teaching is always a luxury for the teacher and a form of leisure (in Greek, *“schole”*) for him and his pupil: an activity meaningful for both, having no ulterior purpose. (1970b, 101).

That is the main point in friendship. Gratis. Not only because there is no economic exchange involved, but because you are doing what you are doing for the joy of it, having no ulterior purpose. Gratis. Learning together is not a means towards an end, but an end in itself, for the joy of it. It is a pleasure to do it with friends, as an expression of friendship. That is, in my view, what is happening around the world. Friends come together and begin learning what they can do in the current transition; which are the challenges of the current horror. How can you begin an alternative path? Together. With friends.

There is another component of this path that we must consider carefully, with open eyes. Working with Indigenous communities brought us back from the future years ago. There, you don’t have expectations. You have hopes. In Spanish, we have a beautiful expression to say that you have hopes: *Abrigo esperanzas,* that is, I wrap my hopes up well, for them not to freeze. You nourish your hopes, you care for them. As Ivan once said, “Hope… means trusting faith in the goodness of nature, while expectation… means reliance on results which are planned and controlled by man. Hope centers desire on a person from whom we await a gift. Expectation looks forward to satisfaction from a predictable process which will produce what we have the right to claim”. And he also warned us: “The Promethean ethos has now eclipsed hope. Survival of the human race depends on its rediscovery as a social force.” (1970b,105-6).

At the end of the Intercontinental Encounter against Neoliberalism, the Zapatistas, giving a new use to old leftist jargon, suggested the creation of the International of Hope. Using words as their main weapon, the Zapatistas rediscovered hope as a social force and opened a whole new avenue of transformation for all of us.

Radical hope is the very essence of popular movements. People start some action with the conviction that their mobilization may bring the changes they are looking for. But we need to be aware that hope is not the conviction that something will happen in a certain way, but the conviction that something makes sense, no matter what happens.

Hope should be associated with hospitality: “recovering threshold, table, patience, listening, and from there generating seedbeds for virtue and friendship on the one hand — on the other hand radiating out for possible community, for rebirth of community.” (Illich, 1996) Hope and friendship are indeed key in the path to recovering the commons.

For many years, we all have been orienting our lives as a projection to the future. It looked sensible and pertinent, because there were some deep trends that allowed us to anticipate what will happen in the future. Tomorrow looked more or less like today. Many predictions failed, of course; you cannot know the future. But it was possible to anticipate certain evolution, based on past experience. Agronomic wisdom was based in the careful observation of nature, to detect timely some signals that allowed to anticipate the probable evolution of natural phenomena, if we will have or not enough rain, if we need or not to change the date to put the seeds… Something similar was done with social, economic and political events. It was possible to anticipate the evolution of the main phenomena affecting us.

We need to be aware that such condition entirely changed. We entered a time of radical uncertainty. We don’t know what will happen. Natural and social phenomena became unpredictable. The deep trends allowing us to foresee what will happen are no longer there. We don’t know. In a very real sense, that only means to come back to our senses. We never knew, for sure. We are now consciously open to surprise.

Yes, we are now coming back from the future, living in the present, living in our own places, not in search of any kind of mobility which will take us to the centers of power of the global economy…

To be back from the future means to resist the temptation of pretending to know the future and even worst, to be able to control it. To resist the sin of pretending to know what our children and young people will need, what they will want, not today or tomorrow, but in a year, in ten years, in twenty years, the rest of their lives… To resist the idea that we can plan a learning process for them to be prepared in a distant future for something that we pretend that we know today… A plan defining the knowledge, skills or dispositions that they all may need, as preparation for life or work, even if we cannot know what kind of life or work they will have, in what kind of planet they will live…

To be back from the future means to be living in the present. Instead of sin, virtue. Virtue, that is, “shape, order and direction of action informed by tradition, bounded by place, and qualified by choices made within the habitual reach of the actor”. Virtue is “practice mutually recognized as being good within a shared local culture which enhances the memories of a place” (Illich 1990, p.1).

Back from the future means to be here, talking with friends, instead of staying physically here but only in transit, your being going some place else… The question is really living, instead of going… To be a student means in a sense to stop living, in order to just go – to go for the grade, the diploma, the job…

Back from the future means resisting the idea of goals, having them, dreaming about them, reaching them… Yes, I know, in some contexts, if the parents find that their 12 years old has no goals they immediately call a shrink… Apparently, in some societies you cannot survive without goals. In other places, to have goals is a sin… I know nothing about the future, except that it does not exist. I have no goals. My grandmother passed away, when she was 96 years old, ignoring what it is to have a disease… or to be infected by a goal. We have motives, impulses, forces rooted in precedent, giving us direction and meaning in our living present.

“True learning”, Ivan once said, “can only be the leisurely practice of free people”. In the consumer society, he also said, we are either prisoners of addiction or prisoners of envy. Only without addiction or envy, only without educational goals, in freedom, we can enjoy true learning.

In my place, every I is a we. And thus we live together, in our living present, rooted in our social and cultural soil, nourishing hopes with friends at a time in which all of us, inspired by the Zapatistas, are creating a whole new world, open to the surprise of another era.