

PROJECT OF AN INTERNATIONAL MEETING

**Groups of readers of Ivan Illich's work meet in order to speak
about the relevance of his thoughts in the world today**

Place: Cuernavaca, Morelos, México

Date: November 2007

Ivan Illich passed away in December 2002. Five years after his death, a group of friends and readers are convoking other friends and readers around the world to meet in Cuernavaca. There, more than thirty years ago, thanks to the fruitful milieu provided by the *Centro Intercultural de Documentación* (CIDOC) headed by Valentina Borremans, he launched a critical debate on the major institutions of industrial society and the underlying public certainties supporting them.

The convoking group has read aloud and commented:

The Celebration of Awareness, Tools for Conviviality, Useful Unemployment, Energy and Equity, Disabling Professions, Gender, In the Vineyard of the Text, Corruptio optimi quae est pessima, translated as The Rivers North of the Future.

Besides, several members of the group have read individually all of Illich's works available in Spanish.

We know that, in other countries, other groups of readers of Illich meet in order to read his works aloud. Fomenting this almost forgotten form of communitarian reading is very important in an age of deep mutations of the material and psycho-somatic conditions of reading, or, in Illich's terms, "of

the *technology of writing* and the *ethology of reading*.” In that context, we think of the progressive substitution of the evanescent screen for the material page as main support of the text. We are convinced that the modalities of reading are not indifferent to the personal understanding and the public reception of ideas, and that Illich is better understood when read aloud.

This meeting is especially significant for the hosting county. In spite of having lived so long in Mexico, Illich is known and has been read by very few Mexicans. The influence that he might have had in the 1970 mainly reached Mexico from abroad, as the news of his international fame. Though some members of the political and academic class paid him an occasional visit, this never influenced their policies and rarely their writings.

Today, the ruins left by six decades of Development, the disrespect shown by established professionals for the initiatives of laymen, the rise of facilitators and other post-professional counselors combined with the expanding tyranny of the market and the systematic destruction of the traditional commons impel Mexico’s people toward rebellion. We ask us: now that we have woken up from the development dream, is it not time to rediscover Ivan Illich?

We want to call friends and readers of Ivan to gather on Mexican soil, the country where he lived so long. It was in Mexico that he elaborated the first aspect of his critique of tools, which studies what tools *do*. As to the second aspect, that studied what tools *say* (or, if you prefer, analyses the *symbolic effects of technology*), it led him to revisit some of the ideas which had been fundamental to his analysis of “what tools do.” We know that he then submitted many of the central concepts of his earlier writings to a disciplined critique. He said for instance that he “repented” from having analyzed Education, Health, Transportation and Housing institutions as if they were tools at the disposal of their clients for learning,

healing, moving or dwelling freely. The questions that we want to submit to our friends are of the following type:

- how can we read *Tools for Conviviality* in the light of its author's critique?
- what are service institutions today if they can no longer be understood as tools to reach the personal goals of their clients or patients?

Even if he rarely expressed it, Illich's immersion in Mexican culture – in particular the village of Ocotepéc – profoundly marked him, so we can hope that many friends and readers will somehow be willing to “see Mexico through his eyes.” In spite of the tyranny of the market and of policies aimed at increasing market dependencies, this Mexico – it is our conviction – survives in the heart of its people, in what Guillermo Bonfil called *el Mexico profundo*.

For us, citizens of a fretted country, this encounter must encourage us to defend this “deep Mexico” that the economic and political elites seem to have doomed.

Cuernavaca, April 2007, *Circulo de lectura de Iván Illich*.
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