

## COMMONING IN THE NEW SOCIETY

### **Abstract:**

In this essay, the authors present what common people at the grassroots are doing, in the commons movement, as an alternative social path which is achieving the goals of the degrowth movement in both natural and social terms. After briefly examining the implications of economic growth, they actualize the main arguments of the critics of development that formulated the analytical framework for the degrowth movement. They thus present a radical critique of the dominant economic and political mentality, arguing that degrowth should go beyond capitalism and socialism and also beyond representative democracy. They suggest that radical democracy and commoning, the practice and approach currently adopted at the grassroots by millions of people all around the world, are real and realistic, *Commons*, which is very diverse and includes different forms of relationships. All of them are real and possible paths to a posindustrial convivial society, expression of an ongoing revolution, and clearly illustrated by the Zapatista experience.

## COMMONING IN THE NEW SOCIETY

### **Introduction**

The idea of degrowth puts in question one of the fundamental pillars of capitalist economy logic: its need to expand. Economic growth not only implies plunder and destruction, not only implies increased production and consumption of goods and services, but also necessarily involves the reproduction of capitalist social relationships, which in turn generate more and more exploitation, dispossession, individualism, violence, discrimination and repression, while at the same time systematically blocking and limiting the resurgence of another world, based on another type of social relationships, that is not only possible but also necessary in order to achieve the ideals of the degrowth movement.

The degrowth proposal cannot reduce itself to bare technical or redistribution issues, designed to decrease the ecological footprint or improve “resource” management, without questioning the core of the dominant system. Neither is it possible to transform the violence and destruction inherent in the concept of development by adding qualifiers such as *sustainable, human, participatory, green*, etc. The idea of degrowth must transform not only the direction of economic growth but also the regime of social relationships underlying the patterns of economic growth of capitalist society. This requires superceding

economic thinking and reimagining our relationships to natural metabolisms and ways of organizing society. In this work/task, in Mexico and Latin America, indigenous people have been our teachers. They demonstrated, in both theory and practice, that it is possible to create an active process of degrowth within a regime of social relationships based on *commoning*: reclaiming and regenerating old commons and creating new commons.<sup>i</sup>

Our paper deepens the critique of development, in all of its forms, by considering it as a way of hiding and covering up capitalist economy growth and destruction of nature and people. Also it examines the concept of “commons”, that can help us to conceive a new society, distinct from eurocentric and colonial thinking, which continues to consider nature as an exploitable resource (instead of as our mother) and modern nation-state democracy or super-national governments as the political space for the resolution of conflicts and problems (instead of as a major impediment to the creation and implementation of genuine resolutions). Finally we will present what we call a “convivial and post-industrial path”, which is being built daily within our community spaces and commons, through the everyday revolution that is already happening.

### **Critique to development**

Almost thirty years ago Ivan Illich invited some of his friends to talk about “After development, what”. It was the time in which the idea of postdevelopment became fashionable, the years of structural adjustment and “the lost decade for development” in Latin America, the years in which we discovered the nature of the beast: development was a global experiment that, in the experience of the majority of people on Earth, miserably failed.

To share their reflections after three years of conversations, these friends produced *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power* (Sachs 2010). For them, development was at the center of a powerful but fragile semantic constellation; the time had come to dip into the archeology of the key concepts constituting it and to call attention to its ethnocentric and violent nature.

In Gustavo Esteva's entry on “development”, after an attempt to “unveil the secret of development and see it in all its conceptual starkness” -- including the realization that “from the unburied corpse of development every kind of pest had started to spread” -- Gustavo described his experience beyond development with the idea of commoning. His essay ended in an invitation to celebrate and a call for political action. He did celebrate “the appearance of new commons, creatively opened...after the failure of the developer's strategies to transform traditional people into economic men”. The essay was also a plea “for political controls to protect those new commons and to offer common folks a more favorable social context for their activities and innovations”. (Sachs 2010: 19-20).

Today, we would formulate the invitation and the plea in a different way but the agenda remains.

The fashion today is not so much postdevelopment but postmodernity and postmodernism. Postmodernity, not as what is after modernity, but as a disillusioned moment of the modern condition: a state of mind of those painfully dissociating themselves from the great truths of modernity –its social paradigm- unable to find for themselves a new unitary system of reference. This means a simple loss of values and orientation, anomy, or the insight of pluralism. Postmodernism would be a scholarly method to elaborate new concepts for the interpretation of social reality, a new social paradigm. (Dietrich et al.: 2011).

Today, furthermore, there is universal consensus that we are at the end of an historical period, but the identification of the corpse –what it is that has ended- is highly controversial. In short, for the purposes of this essay, the list of candidates would include development, neoliberalism, the American empire, capitalism as we know it so far, the economic society and modernity. (HYPERLINK "/C:/imap:/gustavoesteva@gmail.com@imap.googlemail.com:993/fetch>UID>/INBOX>182751" \n \_topi.)

Today, finally, the mood has really changed. Bollier and Helfrich write that “it has become increasingly clear that we are poised between an old world that no longer works and a new one struggling to be born. Surrounded by an archaic order of centralized hierarchies on the one hand and predatory markets on the other, presided over by a state committed to planet-destroying economic growth, people around the world are searching for alternatives”. (Bollier and Helfrich 2012, xi).

### **The idea of commons**

Should we continue using the word “commons”, which, for example, does not have equivalent in Spanish and other languages? It is now evident that the term invites us to engage in a complex historical exploration, to study and compare community forms in different places and periods. **Commons** is a generic term for a variety of social forms existing in Europe, particularly in England, before capitalist or socialist industrialization transmogrified them into resources. Similarly, **community** is a generic term for very diverse social organizations. For example: the Spanish *ejido* (HYPERLINK "/C:/imap:/gustavoesteva@gmail.com@imap.googlemail.com:993/fetch>UID>/INBOX>182751" \n \_topii) is similar but not identical to the English commons, to the very diverse Indigenous regimes the Spaniards called *ejidos*, or to the modern Mexican *ejidos*, invented in the 1917 Constitution, after the Mexican Revolution, implemented in the 1930s and reformulated or destroyed with NAFTA after 1992. We cannot accommodate into the conventional notion of commons or community some contemporary novelties that are currently called **new commons**. We need to make evident the similarities and differences of a thousand different forms of social existence which are beyond the private threshold but are not public spaces, and in which the free encounter of forms of doing things, speaking them and living them –art, *tecné*- expresses a culture and the opportunity of cultural creation. Such exploration should give special consideration to at least three pertinent hypotheses: that vernacular gender defined the shape of those forms in the past and it is probably broken but not dead in many of its contemporary heirs (Illich 1982); that the

individual was created in the model of the text in the XII century (Illich 1993); and that friendship is the basic stuff constituting many of the contemporary urban commons. We also need to explore the limits and contours of various social forms we call commons, including associated responsibilities and any possible oppressions or straitjackets. Such historical and anthropological exploration may enrich our perception of the present, revealing what has been hidden by modernity and dis-covering the options opened, as urgent challenges, in the time of the death of development.

All this should be explored if we seriously assume, as we are doing in this essay, that commons, at least certain kinds of commons, is already the cell of the new society. As usual, such a new society is emerging in the womb of the old one and is often hidden and distorted by the mentality of the latter. One of the most important and urgent challenges we face today is to reset our gaze, in order to be able clearly to identify the novelty of this sociological creation of ordinary folks, who all over the planet are forging the new society through a new kind of revolution, a silent and almost invisible revolution.

### **Is it the economy, stupid?**

The patriarchal, occidental-colonial, modern and capitalist conception of the world is based on division and segmentation of nature and of all aspects of life. Current capitalist society is a reflection of this segmentation: it divides thinking into disciplines (education, medicine, economy, art, communication, science, etc.), beings into living and non-living, workers into sectors (the metallurgic, academic/educational, health, public, finance, cultural, construction and other sectors), the earth into properties, we into I/you, time into hours of work or leisure, and so on. Completely distinct from this worldview of division are the worldviews of the indigenous communities in diverse parts of the world, in which there is no separation: We are in nature, we are a we, we cycle through the community to live and to participate in the various aspects of life. There is no class of rulers or of the ruled; there are no teachers -- children learn in community; there are no professional organizers of special events -- instead, rotating committees organize the festivals; God is not separated from the world and all beings are sacred including the mountains and rivers; etc.

In the dominant society, everything is fragmented and one of the fragments is the economy, which, according to Polanyi, was disembedded from the society and culture to function as an autonomous sphere. This fragment has, like the others, its own experts and professionals: The economists, bankers and financiers, business owners and those who, from positions in the government and the corporations, involved in the administration of “resources”, “natural” or “human”. This fragment is given priority, since the dominant economic system increasingly determines and contaminates all aspects of social life. The society is organized according to the logical presupposition that man’s wants (ends) are unlimited while his means (“resources” or means) are limited, which generates the economic problem *par excellence*, the

allocation of resources. The economy would thus be the way to allocate resources to alternative ends, through plan (socialism) or the market (capitalism). To achieve personal and social goals (about which no ethical filter is applied), it is presumed necessary to apply instrumental rationality and economic logic to minimize costs and maximize benefits, thus transforming any situation into an economic problem.

Such rationality is currently applied to the commons. Elinor Ostrom, for example, who won her Nobel Prize for her studies on the commons, treats them as “common-pool resources” (CPR). Such approach dissolves them. In *The Development Dictionary* Vandana Shiva clarified this. She explains how a science-dominated society, following the sexist notions of Bacon, implies the desacralization of nature and the destruction of the commons. “The transformation of nature from a living, nurturing mother to inert, dead and manipulable matter was eminently suited to the exploitation imperative inherent in nascent capitalism” (Sachs 2010: 233). The enclosure of the commons, explained Shiva, “was the watershed which transformed people’s relationship both to nature and to one another. It replaced the customary rights of people to use the remaining commons by laws of private property. The Latin root of the word ‘private’, interestingly enough, means ‘to deprive’” (Ídem: 234). She made a very important point for the current discussion: “A life support base can be shared; it cannot be owned as private property or exploited for private profit”. (Ídem: 233). “To speak of the commons as if it were a natural resource is misleading at best and dangerous at worst”, observes Peter Linnebaugh; “the commons is an activity and, if anything, it expresses relationships in society that are inseparable from relations to nature. It might be better to keep the word as a verb, rather than as a noun, a substantive” [HYPERLINK "/C:/imap:/gustavoesteva@gmail.com@imap.googlemail.com:993/fetch>UID>/INBOX>182751" \n \\_top](#) (Linnebaugh 2008: 279).

The comment of one of the reviewers of this paper illustrates well the dominant mentality:

The author's idea that we need not think in economic terms of efficiency and scarcity for managing our commons does appear naive to me. The degrowth reality is that with more than 6 billion people on this planet we need to be extremely efficient in the use of our renewable resources, and need to economize them because, unlike non-renewable resources such as fossil-fuels, they are not ready available: feeding the world population with manual and organic agriculture without increasing HANPP is a challenge for every farmer who will have to cultivate land in the most resource-efficient way.

In our view, this approach sterilizes the degrowth movement, which is thus conceived as an initiative to change everything for nothing to change. What seems naive is to assume that the economic logic, the economic mentality, necessarily associated with minimizing costs and maximizing benefits (meaning, in the current society, maximizing profits), can change their current destructive course and deal with our current predicaments.

The “degrowth reality” is that no efficient use of “resources” can feed the hungry, if the pattern of

consumption of the privileged minority continues. The planet has no longer enough carrying capacity for that minority: degrowth, in that world, does not mean to be more efficient but to change patterns of production and consumption, as well as ways of life, for non-economic reasons, for reasons of sheer survival and for ethical reasons. As the ETC group has demonstrated, the supposedly efficient agribusiness, controlling 70% of the food “resources”, feeds only 30% of the population, while the small farmers and the people themselves, usually perceived as inefficient, feeds 70% of the population but they own only 18% of the land. Of course, they need to improve their means, their methods, and they are courageously attempting to do so, often against all odds. The main limitation for them, the reason why they have been unable to develop all their productive potential, is the dominant economic mentality and operation, imposed to them by the corporations and the governments.

There have been efforts that have tried to go beyond the State-Market dichotomy but couldn't get out of economic mentality. Derek Wall is an example of this. He celebrates “a commons based economy: peer to peer, social sharing, collaborative consumption, commons, economic democracy are all terms that cover economic activity that moves beyond the market and the state, based on cooperation and harnessing human creativity”. He assumes that “the commons economy moves us beyond commodification”. He acknowledges that Marx and Elinor Ostrom “are polar opposites” but sees them as “the two towering figures” in the “intellectual task to show that commons...or democratic ownership of society by communities works”. He thinks that “an economy beyond both capitalism and top down planning by central government is possible”. He assumes that his task “is to indicate that it is possible to think outside the boxes (capitalism or central planning)” and to provide “the germ of a solution to the dilemma of sustainable development”. (2012a). For Wall, the concept of social sharing/commons, elaborated by Benkler [HYPERLINK](#)

"/C:/imap:/gustavoesteva@gmail.com@imap.googlemail.com:993/fetch>UID>/INBOX>182751" \n  
\_topiv, “provides a way of raising standards of living, in an economy marked by static or negative growth in GDP”.(2012b).

The words Derek Wall uses belong to the world of the commons movement and he uses them to argue for interesting causes. Like Ms. Ostrom, however, he cannot go far enough or deep enough. He cannot think out of the box of the economic mentality or the development enterprise. Commoning, the commons movement, is not an alternative economy but an alternative to the economy. The idea is to radically abandon the “law of scarcity” construed by the economists as the keystone for the theoretical construction in which economics is based. Polanyi evidenced that economic determinism was a 19th century phenomenon, that the market system violently distorted our views of man and society, and that these distorted views were proving one of the main obstacles to the solutions of the problems of our civilization (Polanyi 1944, 1947). Louis Dumont, on his part, showed that the invention of economics was a process of the social construction of ideas and concepts, and the economic “laws” were but deductive inventions

which became axioms to carry on a new political project (Dumont 1977). People all over the world, perceived in the margins of the economic world, are in fact challenging the economic assumptions in both theory and practice.

In that marginalized world to which we belong, we are not looking for a fair, solidarity economy, integrated with politics and society, with less growth, but we want to reconstruct our reality and our lives beyond economy, in an austere society, without exploitation, unconnected with capitalist market. Thinking things not in economic terms implies not to start neither from instrumental rationality nor from needs, It requires not to separate nature from us, or work from the rest of our lives (from learning, from community decisions, from ability of healing), it means recuperating our autonomous capacities of eating, healing, inhabiting, moving, subsisting in general, and going back to use or use value. We need to reconstruct relationships of solidarity and reciprocity, over competition and abuse, in one word “commoning”. Commoning implies for many “marginal” people a radical escape from the intellectual prison of the dismal science and from the continual aggression and encroachment by economic forces to which they are exposed. They can no longer accept to be ruled by the economy.

#### **And democracy/participation?**

“Beware of participation”, Esteva wrote in 1985, as a warning against the increasing use of “popular participation”. He argued that it was being proposed as a democratic or revolutionary tool for those “hitherto excluded” from development and economic and political power, but it was operating as a sociological tool of manipulation, built as a myth to renew colonizing metaphors in agony (Esteva 1985:77). When international institutions like the World Bank and oppressive and corrupt governments asked community workers to use “popular participation” to implement their policies, they both confirmed the very nature of the tool and posed a serious predicament for those workers. Should they instead avoid participation? They were confronted with the kind of problems brilliantly described by Mae Shaw, as community workers seem always trapped “between (top down) policy and (bottom up) politics, between the possibilities for agency and the realities of structure, between micro-experience and macro-analysis” (Shaw 2011: 140). Within the neoliberal framework, such traditional tension has been compounded with the puzzling, apparent convergence of the policies abandoning conventional roles of the state and dismantling social services and the community struggle reclaiming autonomy.

As TINA (there is no alternative) became the hegemonic discourse and both ‘roll-back’ and ‘roll-out’ became endemic in public policy, for the dismantling of the welfare state, people reacted with TATA (there is a thousand alternatives). Their democratic struggle, for a long time centered in more participation for those excluded, took a different direction.

Many people are still involved in a struggle to improve formal, representative democracy, both to address the well known vices of the electoral processes and to improve the operation of the government. Other

people are struggling to introduce or strengthen participatory democracy, widening the areas of people's participation in the functions of government, through popular initiative (for norms and laws), referendum and plebiscite, recall of elected officers, participatory budgeting, transparency, accountability and others. The "progressive" Latin American governments illustrate this point. More and more people, however, are trying to place both formal and participatory democracy at the service of radical democracy (Lummis 1996). It has been practiced since time immemorial by communities all over the world and is usually associated with autonomy. In a process that implies reorganizing the society from the bottom-up, the idea is to extend such way of governing to the entire society, under the very basic and logic assumption that democracy should be where the people are, not "up-stairs", and the generalized awareness that their representatives are not representing them and they increasingly abandon their responsibilities and their formal commitment with the public interest and the common good.

Ecological awareness, the conscience of the severity of the environmental destruction caused by the *growth* of capitalist social relationships, is combined today with political awareness, the conscience that our dominant political institutions can no longer be trusted. "*¡Basta!* Enough!" said the Zapatistas in 1994. "*¡Que se vayan todos!* All of them should go!" was said ten years later in Argentina. "My dreams don't fit into your ballot box", said the *indignados* in Spain in 2011. "We will not leave until they leave!" proclaimed the Greek that same year. For the first time in 200 years millions of Americans, the people who invented the modern model of democracy, found it dysfunctional: it is at the service of the 1%, not of the 99%, said the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011. All these movements don't share a new political design or have a ready-made answer for their questions. But they are not paralyzed or trapped in "anger, desperation or self-blame" (Shaw 2011:143). They are involved in a variety of initiatives, many of which are getting the name of **localization** as an alternative to both globalization and localism. They are rooting and affirming themselves more than ever in their own physical and cultural places, resisting the mortal wave of global forces, but at the same time open their arms, minds and hearts to others like them, to create wide coalitions of the discontented – in a process that is transforming their resistance into liberation.

### **The postindustrial, convivial path**

There is increasing awareness that the current trends and the prevailing structure of our tools and institutions menace the survival of mankind. As Ivan Illich warned us long time ago, our institutions have become not only frustrating and counter-productive, but destructive of society as a whole (Illich 1973). Reading today what Illich called his "pamphlets" of the early 1970s we cannot avoid a feeling of sadness for a path not taken. But we can no longer ignore his warnings.

"The Promethean ethos has now eclipsed hope. Survival of the human race depends of its rediscovery as a social force," wrote Illich towards the end of *Deschooling Society* (1971: 106). This is exactly what the Zapatistas did in 1994. In liberating hope from its intellectual and political prison, the Zapatistas created the



possibility of a renaissance, which is now emerging in the net of plural paths they discovered or is daily invented by the imagination they awakened.

Winds of change currently cross the Earth. As *subcomandante Marcos* timely observed, we are in a peculiar historical moment in which to explore the future we are forced to explore the past. For many, such exploration offers a fresh reading of The Magna Carta (1215) (Linebaugh 2008); they find in it inspiration to reclaim or regenerate old commons and to resist policies and actions destroying both nature and society at a planetary scale. Many others are engaged in the celebration of their own non-western traditions to reinvent their paths. These explorations seem to converge in the “active movements of human commoning and the worldwide demands to share wealth (Linebaugh 2008: 280)”.

Everywhere, millions of people, perhaps billions, are regenerating their own worlds in a new kind of revolution, whose sense of proportion is in radical contrast with most revolutionary traditions. This revolution goes beyond development and globalization; marginalizes and limits the economic sphere, reestablishing politics and ethics at the center of social life; reclaims *comunalidad* [HYPERLINK "/C:/imap:/gustavoesteva@gmail.com@imap.googlemail.com:993/fetch>UID>/INBOX>182751" \n \\_topy;](#) assumes new political horizons, beyond human rights and the nation-state; adopts radical pluralism, to create a world in which many worlds can be embraced; and uses representative and participatory democracy as transitional forms towards radical democracy.

In his “Cuernavaca pamphlets”, Illich shared the Rome Club’s concern about demographic and economic growth (Meadows et al. 1972), but he took the argument farther. For him, the expansion of services will produce more damages in culture than the production of goods on the environment. His radical critique of the school, the health system and transportation (Illich 1971, 1974, 1975) illustrated what he called the counterproductivity of all modern institutions: after some threshold, they begin to produce the opposite of what they intend.

In 1971 Illich proposed the hypothesis that only adopting a common roof (maximum limits) of certain technical dimensions in the means of production a society has viability and enables political alternatives. He discussed the hypothesis with a group of Latin-Americans, in his seminars in CIDOC, and then published *Tools for Conviviality* (1973), which starts with the following words: “During the next several years I intend to work on an epilogue to the industrial age. I want to trace the changes in language, myth, ritual and law, which took place in the current epoch of packaging and schooling. I want to describe the fading monopoly of the industrial mode of production and the vanishing of the industrially generated professions this mode of production serves. Above all, I want to show that two-thirds of mankind still can avoid passing through the industrial age, by choosing right now a postindustrial balance in their mode of production which the hyper-industrial nations will be forced to adopt as an alternative to chaos (Illich

1973:xxi)”.

Again, this was a road not taken. The hyper-industrial nations are facing chaos, and the others are in a foolish race to catch up with them. 20 years ago it was possible to think that China would be able to transform itself without inviting the disaster: it moved in bicycle. Today the Napoleon’s expression “yellow threat” is heard again: one hundred million cars limit the circulation of 700 million bicycles. The current perspective opens unbearable environmental risks not only for China but for the whole world.

Illich formulated a radical critique of the industrial mode of production, capitalist or socialist, formulated the conditions for the convivial reconstruction of society and anticipated both the struggle to produce the needed political inversion and people’s reactions in the time of the crisis – the current time. His ideas are a useful guide to understand what is happening in the world. The governments increasingly operate as mere administrators of private corporations, while common people, for reasons of strict survival or in the name of old ideals, are reacting with vigor and imagination. Their initiatives are increasingly wide and radical, and are currently shaping the peaceful uprising resisting the mortal wave of global forces, destroying both nature and culture, and beginning a convivial reconstruction which follows paths very similar to those anticipated by Illich.

Illich took the word conviviality from Brillat-Savarin, who coined it in 1825, but gave to it a new meaning. “I have chosen ‘convivial’ as a technical term to designate a modern society of responsibly limited tools,” a society in which the people control the tools. The word designates a new mental framework, a new kind of society. It defines personal freedom in a technically mature society which can be called postindustrial. Illich calls convivial “a society on which modern technologies serve politically interrelated individuals rather than managers”. He applies the term to tools, rather than to people. He calls austere the people that found their joy and balance in the use of convivial tools. Austerity “does not exclude all enjoyments, but only those which are distracting from or destructive of personal relatedness...(It) is a complementary part of a more embracing virtue: friendship or joyfulness. It is the fruit of an apprehension that things or tools could destroy rather than enhance *eutrapelia* (or graceful playfulness) in personal relations” (Illich 1973: xxiv-xxv).

According to Illich, “the present crisis of our major institutions ought to be welcomed as a crisis of revolutionary liberation because our present institutions abridge basic human freedom for the sake of providing people with more institutional outputs. This world-wide crisis of world-wide institutions can lead to a new consciousness about the nature of tools and to majority action for their control. If tools are not controlled politically, they will be managed in a belated technocratic response to disaster. Freedom and dignity will continue to dissolve into an unprecedented enslavement of man to his tools (Ídem: 12)”. That is the point. Today. Both points. The current enslavement. The current opportunity. Millions of people are reacting that way.

“The nation-state has become so powerful that it cannot perform its stated functions,” wrote Illich. For him,

the corporations and the professions can use the law and the democratic system to establish their empire. American democracy could survive a victory by Giap, but could not survive the victory of the corporations. The total crisis makes obvious that “the nation-state has grown into the holding corporation for a multiplicity of tools, and the political parties into an instrument to organize stockholders for the occasional election of boards and presidents... They are useless at a moment of a general crash...” When this becomes clear for the people the opportunity for change emerges. “The same general crisis that could easily lead to one-man rule, expert government, and ideological orthodoxy is also the great opportunity to reconstruct a political process in which all participate (Ídem: 109)”.

For Illich, socialist ideals could not be achieved without an inversion of our institutions and the substitution of convivial for industrial tools...and the retooling of the society can only be achieved if the socialist ideals are adopted. As an alternative to technocratic disaster, he proposed a convivial society which would be “the result of social arrangements that guarantee for each member the most ample and free access to the tools of the community and limit this freedom only in favor of another member’s equal freedom (Ídem: 12)”

Forty years after this formulation, this is what seems to be happening. Conviviality, observes Hanns-Albert Steger, “is definitely no longer a futuristic utopia; I has become part of our present (Steger 1984)”. People have started to react to an epochal crisis and an epistemic rupture (Esteva 2009). Before governments in panic, given people’s mobilization, and economic and political structures willing to do anything to keep their position, people’s mobilization is taking the form of an uprising (Esteva 2012). They are still resisting, but go to disobedience. They are protesting, but begin a radical rejection. They challenge daily decisions, all the death, all the people in prison, all the environmental destruction, and at the same time they challenge the legitimacy of the system itself, not only its operators: they refuse to give to it their consent and are no longer willing to accept that representation is the synthesis of social consensus. They increasingly assume the moral and social obligation of refusing to obey an apparatus basically anonymous and affirm their independence of that apparatus, to stop being slaves of the tool, subsystems of the system. They acknowledge the decadence of the consumer society and the welfare state, a monopolic and organizational capitalism mixed with the state. They reject with increasing firmness the dominant democratic despotism, which becomes a mantel to simulate the political, economic, and technical imperialism to which more and more people are today subordinated, the system that transform every electoral promise in another link of the chain imprisoning everyone. They show time and again that class domination is first of all domination of people’s conscience and of their confidence in themselves –extended when the idea of change is reduced to the change in leadership. Step by step, they articulate the terms of a social organization based in personal energy, that is, the energy every person can control; in the freedom regulated by the principles of customary law; in the re-articulation of the old triad: person, tool and society; and all this supported in three classic pillars: friendship, hope and surprise.

In their autonomous centers for the production of knowledge, as an alternative to the institutional production of truth, people are reflecting on a new agenda. They are exploring, among other things, the following.

**‘Social commons’ are very diverse.**

The new autonomous **units of *comunalidad*** are ways of life and governance for diverse human groups, mainly indigenous. They reclaimed and are regenerating their traditional “commons” and give them a contemporary form, beyond modern individualization.

The **new commons** are contemporary sociological creations of western or westernized individuals, operating as dissident vanguards in modern societies. They express their discontent with the industrial mode of production and capitalism through the adoption of practices inherited from traditional commons.

**Shared commons** are social and natural areas, fields or spheres, whose protection is required for the survival of specific groups or humankind. Many people are currently struggling to apply to them and to “**networked commons**” the traditional rules of access defining the commons.

**Social commons are social relationships.**

A commons, any commons, defines social relationships establishing **norms of behavior, mutual obligations** (which may include derived rights) and specific forms of **social organization**. They have a perimeter: the limits, the field, within which the relations operate, connected with specific material or immaterial elements.

**Social commons are not resources and are not defined by ownership.**

Both the market and the state are continually invading, attacking or destroying the social commons. They transmogrify their relationships and transform material and immaterial elements existing in them into waste or private or public resources or commodities. Modern colonization “economize” the commons, that is, transmogrifies them into economic goods, commodities, imposing on them a regime of public or private property and the corresponding norms. The current struggle attempts to protect them from such interventions, to avoid their destruction or transmogrification. The idea is to ensure equitable access to them for all commoners, a democratic and transparent administration and appropriate, equitable distribution of their benefits. Resources and commons are opposed and in fact conflicting conditions. Economic society creates scarcity; generate resources (scarce means) and economic value. Shortages can exist in the commons, not scarcity. The commons are not defined by property rights but by possession. The Magna Carta, which in the Anglo-Saxon tradition created the foundation for the protection of the commons, did not establish rights or property, but norms of respect of the commons, defining limits to the king and nobility. In the contemporary conditions, the questions of ownership, rights and respect may have different forms in different contexts and countries.

**Commoning is realistic**

The commons are back on the political agenda, everywhere. As an economic issue, they seem pie-in-the-sky. Realism requires us to acknowledge that we live in a capitalistic society and “democratic”

nation-states. To protect nature or justice, we must accommodate ourselves to those conditions and to struggle within the dominant framework. This is false realism. Both scholarly scrutiny and empirical experience are evidencing that the dominant system cannot deal with the current crises; as Einstein explained long time ago, you cannot solve a problem within the framework creating it. It lacks realism to continue expecting that conventional paths will deliver what we urgently need. As the Zapatistas say, to change the world is very difficult, perhaps impossible; what seems feasible is to create a whole new world. This is what the people are doing, all over the world, through commoning.

The time has come to enclose the enclosers. Commoning, commonism, reclaiming and regenerating our commons and creating new commons, beyond the dominant economic and political system, define the limits of the current era.

### **The ongoing revolution**

In these times of global fear, writes Eduardo Galeano, some people are afraid of hunger, the others of eating. A billion people may go tonight to bed with an empty stomach and the rest is increasingly aware that what the market provide for their plates is junk or poison. We can no longer wait for the governments and institutional institutions to do something meaningful and effective about this urgent predicament, or that Monsanto or Wal-Mart will have a moral epiphany and stop doing what they are doing.

People are taking the solution into their hands. Vía Campesina is the biggest organization in history: some say that it currently unites 800 million peasants and farmers in 140 countries. They redefined food sovereignty: we must determine what we eat by ourselves...and produce it. And this is happening. The main tool: commoning. It may start as an individual endeavor, as it started in Cuba during the “special period” or in the US, when many people started to transform their lawns into vegetable gardens or to organize deals in the form of CSAs: Community Supported Agriculture, arrangements between urban consumers and farmers, a practice that apparently started in Japan, got a new form in Germany and became epidemic in the US and Canada. More than half of what Havana’s inhabitants eat today is produced there. In Detroit, the very example of industrial development disaster, 900 community gardens are thriving. Sooner than later, individual initiatives or those taken by a small group of friends become a commons.

Examples proliferate in every sphere of daily life. Nouns are replaced by verbs. Instead of education, creating a radical dependence of public or private institutions, more and more people are learning in their commons, discovering that to study can be the leisurely activity of free people, beyond the prison of the school. People are healing, in their commons, reducing their dependence of increasingly dysfunctional and expensive health systems. And so on and so forth. Despite living under exceptionally adverse conditions, the people have not ceased reacting, on the one hand resisting policies and the public and private actions that affect their lives and territories, while on the other hand launching their own initiatives.

On January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1994, the day that NAFTA became operative, a small group of indigenous people called the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) launched their uprising, armed with nothing but machetes

and a few guns. The uprising of civil society, supporting their causes but not their means, put an end to twelve days of armed confrontation. From this point on, the EZLN became a political force of tremendous importance and the champion of non-violence in the country: it has, without a doubt, helped prevent the civil war in which Mexican is currently engulfed, from spreading and deepening further (HYPERLINK "/C:/imap:/gustavoesteva@gmail.com@imap.googlemail.com:993/fetch>UID>/INBOX>182751" \n \_topvi). The EZLN has been a constant source of inspiration for the peaceful reorganization of society from below, by the people themselves, and for the emergence of a vigorous indigenous movement. They participated in two dialogues with the government, the second of which led to the San Andrés Accords, pledging to reforms in the Constitution and in the law, as well as a change in policies that relate to indigenous communities. Following government administrations refused to honor the agreements despite the fact that they received unprecedented public support. After 20 years, without any form of government support, below a military siege and exposure to continuous paramilitary attacks, the Zapatistas have managed to create a new way of living and governing. A law enacted in 1995 through public pressure made it officially illegal for the government to intervene in the Zapatista territories. (This is the reason for the government to use paramilitaries to harass them). The zone that they occupy is now the safest in the country: no crimes have been committed by them, and they have never responded with violence to those committed against them by paramilitaries. In 2010, through correspondence initially addressed to one of the most prominent and respected Mexican philosophers, the Zapatistas successfully organized a public debate on the need to bring back ethics and politics to the center of social life, replacing the economy...as they have done in the territories they control, where they practice radical democracy in a convivial, postindustrial society, in which commoning defines a way of life.

No vanguards. No leaders. No parties. Horizontal grassroots organizations. Commotion, instead of promotion. Ordinary folks doing extraordinary things. They know that the time in which helping still helped are irrevocably past (Groenemeyer in Sachs 2010:55). They need no helpers. Please don't come if you want to help us, said once subcomandante Marcos. But if you think that our struggle is also your struggle, please come. We have plenty of things to talk about. In the last communicate he gave last May, before disappearing as the figure of Subcomandante Marcos, in a collective rebirth, he said:

It is our conviction and our practice, that in order to rebel and to struggle neither leaders nor bosses nor messiahs nor saviors are necessary. To struggle one only needs a sense of shame, a bit of dignity and a lot of organization.

Universidad de la Tierra Oaxaca, January of 2014, reviewed in May of 2014

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1 One of the reviewers of the first version of this paper observed that the common denominator of its different sections is our “particular understanding of the commons”. As we explain in the paper, we are not innovating about the notion of the commons, but following well known and respected authors like Iván Illich and Peter Linnebaugh and the ideas that begin to be conventional wisdom in the commons movement, as can be seen in the book by Bolliers and Helfrich, *The Wealth of the Commons*, or the special supplement of the *Community Development Journal* (Vol. 49 SI, January 2014) dedicated to the commons.