Editor's letter

Once again, the threat of all out nuclear war has become a palpable fear. The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists has moved the doomsday clock to one hundred seconds before midnight, that is, before world annihilation. Since the atom bomb was dropped on Hiroshima in 1945, human self-extinction has become an ineradicable possibility. For this reason, it inaugurated the age in which "we also became totally impotent" — the first of Gunter Anders' "Theses for the Atomic Age".[1]

The atom bomb dehumanizes because it does not distinguish between friend and enemy, between civilian and soldier, between human, animal, and rock. It is the *scale* of nuclear war that reduces humans into indistinguishable elements. But it is not only nuclear bombs that dehumanize because of their disproportionate scale. Social techniques like 'Pandemic' and 'Facebook family products' are also outsized. Whereas Pandemic has been shown capable of managing almost all the world's population, Facebook family products shape the behaviors and perceptions of about half that number every month. Both Pandemic and Facebook family products are techniques designed to administer billions of humans. As such they necessarily treat you and me as instances of one or more statistical class. Accordingly, some social techniques dehumanize just as surely as do some material technologies.

In 1963, Hannah Arendt was asked to comment on the question: "has man's conquest of space increased or diminished

1 Gunther Anders, "Theses for the Atomic Age", *The Massachusetts Review*, 1962, pp.493-505.

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his stature?"[2] To answer, she noted that the atomic age is built on advances in theoretical sciences that "is being expressed but not described, in mathematical processes". Physics, particularly after Quantum Theory, cannot be described because "the meaningless formalism of mathematical signs" cannot be translated into the "meaningful utterances" of everyday speech. The abyss between these two is unbridgeable because meaningful utterances are ultimately grounded in "human sense experience". In contrast, the "physical world view" has been increasingly shaped by "abstracting from this terrestrial condition". Copernicus imagined he was "standing in the sun… overlooking the planets". Einstein imagined an observer who was not even standing in the sun but "poised freely in space". The perplexities of quantum theory are such that Schrodinger confessed, "however we think it, it is wrong". Accordingly, the world view of physics is so extra-terrestrial that it has lost all contact with the sensible world. We can barely think it much less speak of it in ordinary speech. The same detachment from the sensible world has afflicted the social and human sciences as they aped the physical world view. For example, my risk of catching a viral infection is a notion that is both insensible and indescribable precisely because it presupposes the human body as a statistical entity.

However, as Arendt emphasizes, the meaninglessness of the scientific world view does not impair its effectiveness. The scientific world view requires abstractions unmoored from our bodily and terrestrial condition. Yet these abstractions are made real by the social techniques and material technologies that encase us. "The main problem", said Arendt, "is that man can *do*, and successfully do, what he cannot comprehend and cannot describe in everyday human language." Living in an

2 Hannah Arendt, "The Conquest of Space and the Stature of Man", in *Between Past and Future*, (Penguin Books, 1968)

incomprehensible and unspeakable world of our own making implies that "the stature of man would not simply be lowered by all standards we know of, but have been destroyed." It is precisely this possibility that one must confront today, without flinching.

The first issue of *Conspiratio* included a translation of the short essay written in 1971 by Valentina Borremans and Ivan Illich titled, *The Need for a Common Roof*. The argument was deceptively simple. Then as now, policymakers worry about ensuring a minimum or a floor beneath which the consumption of goods and services will not be allowed to fall. As the distance in income and wealth between the rich and the poor reaches grotesque proportions — the top 10 percent of Americans earn more than nine times what the bottom 90 percent does — appeals for a universal basic income resound. As the internet widens in global reach and speed, demands to bridge the digital divide get louder. The pleas to increase the state funding of medicine and education intensify as life expectancy decreases in the US and college students fall deeper in debt. The accepted and acceptable solution to most social and economic problems is to guarantee that everyone has the minimum required — whether in companionship or calories.

In contrast, little if any attention is paid to the maximum or ceiling, to the size of socio-political organizations and technological artifacts. The scale of political entities that comprise billions of humans mirrors that of the tens of thousands of manufactured satellites that now orbit the earth to provide high speed internet service. As Illich wrote in *Tools for Conviviality*, unlimited growth of social techniques and material technologies destroys both the social fabric and the natural environment. What needs to be understood and attended to is not guaranteeing the floor but specifying the ceiling, not providing for the minimum but preventing exceeding a maximum. The continued blindness to the appropriate scale, to

the thresholds within which the human animal can flourish is most evident in discussions about climate change. Scientific and popular opinion insists that the worst of the coming catastrophe can be managed by greening the economy instead of shrinking it. Few recognize that it is the number of cars and not the kind of fuel they use that drives traffic-caused pollution and social dislocation. Examples can easily be added. It is not a minimum handout that ought to be guaranteed but a maximum income that should be established. It is not a minimum broadband speed or years of schooling or doctor's visits that demand political action but rather setting limits to the dependence on computers, education, and healthcare.

This third issue of *Conspiratio* is devoted to the idea of appropriate scale or proportion. It was a persistent theme in the thought and writings of Ivan Illich from the 1950s on. Two years before his death, on December 2, 2000, I wrote a letter to Marilyn Snell who had published a laudatory essay on him for the *Utne Reader*. She had attended the first *Oakland Table* — a seminar series organized in September of that year under the aegis of Jerry Brown —and wanted to know why it began with a two-month-long public discussion of the distinction between places and space. In my letter, I attempted to describe the thrust of Illich's relevant essays on dwelling, waters, and the commons. What took me four lines to say inchoately, Illich rewrote in one. His essays discreetly aimed to reveal "the proportionality between the size of people, the range of pedestrians, the life-span of dwellers on the one hand, and the size and shape of houses, of streets and neighborhoods on the other."

This idea is fleshed out in the first article of this issue. In his 1982 encomium to Leopold Kohr, Illich discloses that he picked up the idea of the "mutual conditioning of social measure and social form" in conversation with Kohr in the 1950s. The appropriate scale, the fit, the proportion between this and that, is not a mathematically measurable quantity. It

is a *certain* quantitative relation beyond which lies 'too much' and below which lies 'too little'. Illich emphasizes the ethical and aesthetic feeling for proportion, its grounding in good taste. He also confesses that he proposed his concept of 'gender' as the "fundamental formal principle" of proportionate social forms — each dissimilar from one other though internally homogenous. Scientific reason cannot capture the sense for tasteful proportions that these people feel and which those people find distasteful. I leave it to the reader to discern his deeper meaning of appropriate scale that manifests as a "*certain complementariness*" grounded "…in a concrete community".

Modernity can be understood as the techno-scientific juggernaut which continues to erase concrete communities and replace them by imagined ones. But as Humberto Beck reminds us in the second article of this issue, Ivan Illich's thought held out the possibility of another modernity.[3] Beck argues that Illich offers a philosophy of limits and shows the affinities and distance between Illich and other thinkers — Foucault or those of the Frankfurt school. He situates Illich within a lineage that links Kant to Camus. However, it is Beck's claim that the fundamental Illichian premise is "that human has a *form*", which demands our complete attention. "Human being" argues Beck, is the name for a "certain balance of biological, historical, and cultural factors". The animal whose "nature consists in the negation of nature" is nevertheless of a certain form. What lies outside the balance of the limits which constitutes the human being as such, is the desert of dehumanization. Dehumanization or the diminishment of the stature of humans occurs when they are enmeshed in structures that exceed the limits of their form — whether in front of a screen or behind a windshield.

Neto Leao's article *Against Pax Oecologica* follows Beck's. If Beck argues that the human being is that which

3 Beck's excellent essay titled "Another Modernity is Possible: an introduction to Ivan Illich" is being negotiated for publication at Penn State University Press.

exists within certain limits, then Leao shows the conditions of possibility for being human. Hi analytical argument has the virtues of clarity and synoptic grasp of Illich's concepts. The variety of ways of being human may be formally encapsulated by a principle called 'gender'. But, says Leao, practically-speaking, being human requires three kinds of limits or maxima. Commons names the limits to property, whether private or public. Vernacular names the limits to economic exchange, whether as work or shadow work. Convivial names the limits to technologies, whether dominant tools or systems. The historical record is witness to the endless profusion of proportionate social forms. All these were or are the disparate ways of being human, since all these were bounded by the triple limits identified by Leao.

To challenge the capture and dehumanization of human beings is not for the faint of heart. Who today does not think zero is a number? Yet, Christophe Kotanyi asks us to unthink the zero as number if we want to recover the bounded from the unlimited. When you remove all three apples from a bowl, there are no apples left. To say that there is nothing left is true. But to mistakenly equate the absence of apples with the number zero to invite confusion. "Nothing is not a number, and the month has no day zero" says Kotanyi to underscore the historicity of such ideas. Just as one was not a number but rather unity until Simon Stevin (Flemish mathematician, 1548-1620), so also zero did not precede the number one until John Wallis (English mathematician, 1616-1703). It is a matter of ordinary common sense to recognize that three cows are not the same as one cow multiplied three times. That 'one times three' is equal to 'three times one' is a mathematical fiction. Yet this fiction is maintained by presupposing zero as the first number. Kotanyi challenges us to unthink the zero because it "removes the sense for limits". He says the limitless expansion of predatory capitalism is erected from this void.

If Kotanyi asks us to deschool ourselves from a fundamental fiction taught in every classroom in the world, then Gustavo Esteva calls on us to give up the illusion of democracy. Gustavo died on the 22nd of March of this year. He was an indefatigable warrior for the cause of the Zapatistas as a people and as an idea. His proposal of "commonism" was not simply a brilliant poetic act but also captured precisely at least one of the stakes in any world in which it is possible to be human. It is ironic that his excellent essay on commonism was published in the *Community Development Journal* in 2014 but cannot be shared because it belongs to the Oxford University Press. Nevertheless, with the help of his friend and student, Elias Gonzales, Gustavo's unpublished article from 2012 titled *Think from the Abyss* is the fifth in this issue.[4] What is striking about it is the description of Mexico as a failed state. Gustavo suggests that the belief in Democracy is not much different from any other kind of fundamentalism. In the name of Democracy, all manner of illegalities, criminalities, and repressions are visited upon people who want to make their own way, outside the market and the state. Is there not, in his searing account of the Mexican situation, intimations of our own condition and future? Are there not whiffs of an "undeclared state of permanent exception" even in the heartland of Western democracies?

The remaining three articles are of a different ilk. They describe historical and contemporary efforts to become human, to live within communally agreed upon limits. While Samuel and Bavington sketch the centuries-long attempts by finance capital and the State to dehumanize cod fishermen in Newfoundland and Labrador who continue to fight back, Joshua Klein movingly describes builders who not only forge living places but also a historic 'we', by rediscovering the art of

4 Neto Leao did a heroic effort to translate this previously unpublished article from the original Spanish into English.

dwelling. The short article by Isabelle Cedotti completes the set of thematic articles on the common roof. I wanted readers and well-wishers to know how such a beautiful object as the printed edition of *Conspiratio* is brought into the world. Her spare account of how she orchestrates that production, hides a tenderness of feeling and bespeaks the "certain modesty" that Illich points to in his essay.

The philosopher Giorgio Agamben was kind enough to send me his essay titled *Il Vero Politico* last year. It took time and effort to translate, without using professional services.[5] As luck would have it, that work was completed in time for this issue, to which it belongs. Agamben explores the question of how philosophers — specifically Plato and Nietzsche — think about human affairs. "All that is human is not, on the whole, worthy of being taken very seriously; *nonetheless*…" says Nietzsche, echoing Plato. In his essay, Agamben explores the full gamut of this 'nonetheless'. When philosophers engage in political matters, they should do so playfully, says Plato. Else they will take seriously what is not serious. But what does it mean for philosophers to be playful with non-serious issues like politics? Strictly speaking, a child at play is not playing a game. A game has rules whereas play does not. As Agamben says *In Praise of Profanation*, a child makes a toy out of anything that is at hand, just as does a cat "who plays with a ball of yarn as if it were a mouse."[6] Yet both child and cat do so seriously, with full attention, applying themselves with zeal to the task at hand. Law-making seems to be the highest task of politics. To treat politics playfully implies playing, as might a child, with

5 Samar Farage did the heavy lifting to translate Agamben's Italian to English. Fabio Milana offered some crucial corrections. I decided to publish both the original and the translation for the benefit of bi-lingual readers. Crucially, in English one cannot play *play* which would have been the proper translation in many instances of Agamben's essay. Instead, in English, one must play games. However, the freedom of play is suppressed in a game, which is governed by rules.

6 Giorgio Agamben, "In praise of profanation," *Profanations*, Zone Books (2007).

the laws. This stance finds indirect resonance in Illich's article. In serious recognition of Kohr's contributions, Illich playfully names the measure of appropriate scale, a "Kohr". Kohr himself is more explicit. In his preface to *The Breakdown of Nations* he says, "what I often did was to present my serious proposal in a not-so-serious manner, with the result that on more than one occasion a speaker would express an audience's appreciation by thanking me, not for having enlightened them but for having 'greatly entertained' them" (p.xiv). It is better for a philosopher to be mistaken for an entertainer or a buffoon by those who have forgotten how to play.

Wendell Berry sent an advance copy of his new book *The Need to Be Whole: Patriotism and the History of Prejudice* to David Cayley who writes, "Berry's plea for wholeness rests on the idea that a land and its people are, or should be, indivisible". Another way to speak of the land and its people is Illich's description of the appropriately scaled society as one "that can be *encompassed* as a whole". The poles of contemporary political thought — private and public — seem fused, and leaves no room for an encompassable whole. However, between the individual/family on the one hand and the public/nation state on the other, Cayley suggests the possibility of publics "sustained by loyalties, interests, and affinities that are neither entirely personal nor entirely impersonal". Arguably, that which is slowly taken shape around *Thinking After Ivan Illich* is precisely such *a* public.

The last item in this issue is a translation from English and German into Portuguese of Illich's *The Cultivation of Conspiracy* by Silke Kapp. She is among those in the rising Brazilian wave of interest in Illich's thought and writings. The argument in that essay can also be read as concerning the proper locus of the political. Today, the nation state and larger entities — the European Union, NATO, etc — constitute the subjects of serious politics. The 'table' as the site of the political is a laughable idiocy. To engage seriously with politics today

may mean to reverse these polarities; to playfully consider the table as the fount and foundation of the politics to come.

The next issue of Conspiratio will be available online and in print on June 2, 2023. The theme of that issue is Flesh/Body. The last two decades of Illich's life was devoted to historical studies of body and sense perception. His collaboration with Barbara Duden is outstanding in this regard. The explosive spread of internet technology and the screens that accompany it, has only intensified as a question what Arendt took-for-granted: that human sense experience is the ground of everyday speech and comprehension of the world. For the upcoming issue, I invite you to submit articles concerned with the question of body and sense perception, both historically and today. The deadline for submissions is March 31, 2023.

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