

Against *pax oecologica*

by Neto Leão

Preamble

On December 1st of 1980, Illich gave the opening address of the first meeting of the *Asian Peace Research Association* in Yokohama. He entitled the speech *The De-linking of Peace and Development*, which later appeared in *In the Mirror of the Past* as that book's first essay (1992). Sustainable development and sustainability were not yet on the horizon. The sun of Development had not yet set when Illich spoke about it over forty years ago. Development, he said then, was the most recent mutation of the ongoing worldwide war against people's peace – this time in the name of developing them.¹

Peace does not and did not only mean the opposite of war. Illich showed that peace is as vernacular as languages, as various and distinct as modes of abiding and being. It carries a range of historically and culturally shaped meanings and therefore finds little correspondence with one another. Peace was not a universal and abstract idea but a unique and specific spirit enjoyed by each historically constituted community. Though all are today usually translated as 'peace,' the Roman Pax, the Jewish Shalom, the Athenian philia, the Indian Shanti, the Japanese *foodo*, and the Chinese *Huo'ping* have incomparable meanings. Each people, each *ethnos* had its *ethos* of peace; each culture claimed its kind of peace; each community had its way of being left in peace. Illich named this *pax populi* [peoples'

1 Illich, Ivan. *In the Mirror of the Past*, (London: Marion Boyars, 1992), p.16.

peace] that originates from every grassroots which defines and is related to a specific 'we'. Historically, what now goes under the name 'peace' was neither related to economics nor war. The contrast between these varieties of people's peace and what Illich named *pax oeconomica* could not be more significant.

Pax oeconomica refers to the idea that commerce and trade are peaceful alternatives to war. Today, we can see the close link between the two: commerce and war. Europe does less business with Russia because of a simmering war; the oil will flow easily again when the guns fall silent. The idea that economic competition is a less dangerous form of rivalry; that peace is the opposite of war and can be achieved through economic trade has been promoted under the banners of 'progress', 'development', and, more recently, of 'globalization'.

According to Illich, the aggressive spread of economic exchange replaces the variety of cultures with the homogeneity of the market. Today, the imposition of a global market, a worldwide regime of property, and the monopoly of manipulative technology and systems have become synonymous with peace, that is, *pax oeconomica*. *Pax oeconomica* is the planetary 'peace keeping' program that has served as a most efficient weapon of the war against the vernacular, the commons, and conviviality. Until now.

I argue that 'sustainable development' and 'sustainability' are now transmogrifying *pax oeconomica* into a *pax oecologica*. Both protect and expand economic exchange, but whereas the first protects the 'dirty' industries, the second protects the 'clean' industries; whereas the first aims at peace within society even at the cost of nature, the second promises peace among humans on the condition of stopping the human war on nature.

The Green New Deal proposed by the center-left in the USA is perhaps the best name to define this emerging *pax oecologica*. The *New Deal* of the 1930s was meant to save the

capitalist economy without regard for the environment. The *Green New Deal* is intended to protect both the economy and the environment; it saves the environment by economizing it. The Green New Deal does not discourage transforming the commons into property as long as it expands markets; it does not challenge the unlimited expansion of markets as long as these are sustainable, and it does not question the unlimited growth of technologies like cars as long as they are electric. This is the credo of sustainability in the North and sustainable development in the South. It promises peace on earth because of a peace with the earth – through disembodiment, sustainability enlarges *pax oeconomica* into a *Pax oecologica*.

To hell with sustainability

Pax oecologica is a hoax because sustainability is the new scarcity. Sustainable development and the green economy are variations in an ongoing capitalist revolution. If the welfare state is a kidnapping of socialist values, then ‘green capitalism’ is a kidnapping of ecological values. Some think ‘sustainable capitalism’ is an oxymoron. I see no such contradiction due to a simple fact: the concept of ‘sustainability’ – whether in economics, ecology, anthropology, or sociology – does not require any limits to technology, limits to scarcity, or limits to property² (Silva Junior, 2013).

Sustainability and sustainable development are not grounded on limits to technology, property, or scarcity. And precisely because they are not so grounded, it is possible to see them as a case of old wine in new bottles. No limits to technology but the greening of tools. Not limits to property

2 Silva Junior, Roberto Donato da. *A sustentabilidade como híbrido: um olhar para artigos científicos em ecologia, economia, sociologia e antropologia*. 2013. 251 p. Tese (doutorado) - Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Instituto de Filosofia e Ciências Humanas, Campinas, SP. Disponível em: <<http://www.repositorio.unicamp.br/handle/REPOSIP/280507>>.

but recertifying them as organic and renewable. Not limits to scarcity but greening the economy. Sustainability is the new name for old ghosts that have haunted the planet for some time: progress, development, globalization.

Without this triple limit, the ongoing environmental collapse is understood as an accident or negative externality of still immature capitalism. Sustainability sustains the myth that it can redirect economic growth away from environmental damage after some political adjustments and technical corrections. The reason to curse sustainability is so that we can debate real alternatives.

The road to climate change, and therefore to a literal hell on earth, has been 500 years in the making. The recent history of social-biogeochemical degradation cannot be understood without understanding the history of the expansion of market societies – from colonialism to globalization. Its new clean twin, sustainability, is now paving over the dirty road of development. Thirty years of sustainability or sustainable development have not lowered the planet's increasing temperature by one decimal. On the contrary, they are the main reason for its continued increase.

Following Illich's indictment of Development, I argue that sustainability perpetuates deepens a way of living anchored by market and state dependence and fueled by a sense of guilt. The rich can buy organic food wrapped in plastic, drive electric cars, and own Bayer's stocks. The poor, who cannot afford good food and who cannot walk on the roads for new electric cars, are blamed for not embracing conscious consumption. Bayer has a whole section of its business dedicated to sustainability. None of its actions promote the protection of traditional seeds, land reform, or limits soil exploitation. They have a zero-carbon policy based on carbon credits, which only monetizes climate change. They also expect to create a sustainable product

by greening all parts of the chain supply. This is what they call sustainable agriculture. Sustainability means that Brazilian land usurpers can continue to burn the Amazon as long as their tractors are electric and solar panels light their offices.

It is beyond dispute that many others have seen the failure of sustainability and connected it to eco-development and eco-friendly growth. In Europe, for instance, the yet timid but topical Degrowth movement has been framing grounds for limits (D'Alisa et al., 2014). Silja Samerski has also shown a possible correspondence between degrowth and Illich's critique of technology and urged the degrowth movement to "seek deliberate limits to manipulative technologies in general" (Samerski, 2016). Ecosocialism reframed historical materialism by stating that "nonecological socialism is a dead-end" (Lowy, 2014; Leff, 2021). Boaventura de Sousa Santos has argued that sustainable development or sustainability are ways of perpetrating an epistemicide that has been the very cause of the social-ecological catastrophe we are facing and thus evokes epistemologies of the South (Santos, 2018). Luiz Marques has argued that sustainable capitalism is just an illusion and has shown three main aspects of its impossibility (Marques, 2020).³

It has become evident that the discourse on sustainability cannot but generate intellectual confusion, political diversion, and cultural stasis because the term has lost any determinate meaning. The seventeen sustainable development goals of the United Nations (UN – Department of Economic and Social

3 D'Alisa, Giacomo; Demaria, Federico; Kallis, Giorgios. *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*. (New York: Routledge, 2014). Samerski, Silja. Tools for degrowth? Ivan Illich's critique of technology revisited. *Journal Of Cleaner Production*, [s.l.], p.1-10, 2016. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2016.10.039>. Leff, Enrique. *Political Ecology: Deconstructing Capital and Territorializing Life*. (Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2021). Löwy, Michael. *O que é o Ecosocialismo?* 2. ed. (São Paulo: Cortez Editora, 2014). SANTOS, Boaventura de Sousa. *The End of the Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018). Marques, Luiz. *Capitalism and Environmental Collapse*. 3. ed. (Campinas, Switzerland: Editora Unicamp and Springer, 2020).

Affairs) cannot be accomplished based on the premises on which they are founded unless in a science fiction movie. In absolutely none of the descriptions of any goal and none of their political statements will one find a single mention of limits to property, limits to technology, and limits to scarcity that are scaled by the human body.

Take goals two (Zero Hunger) and six (Clean Water and Sanitation). The UN proposes rural development, food security, and nutrition through sustainable agriculture to rid the world of hunger. To guarantee clean water, the UN offers to ensure water availability and sustainable management. Goal eleven (Sustainable Cities and Communities) is framed by sustainable transport and strategies for safer, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable human settlements. Goal eight (Decent Work and Economic Growth) promotes sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work. More generally, as Luiz Marques has shown, for example, in the final text of the UN Conference Rio+20, *The Future We Want*, “the word sustainable is repeated 115 times, without being linked to a single concrete action to make it effective.”⁴

Now, sustainable is the keyword here. It seems to function as a magical word as if agriculture and management could transmogrify into something else when the word sustainable precedes them. Instead, I follow Illich’s argument and understand it as an amoeba word – what Uwe Poerksen calls a plastic word.⁵ In a conversation with David Cayley, entitled *Life as Idol*, Ivan Illich defined amoeba-words as “a term with powerful connotations. A person becomes important when he

4 Marques. Luiz., *ibid*, p.24

5 See Ivan Illich’s *ABC: The Alphabetization of the Popular Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1988), especially chapter seven, *From Taught Mother Tongue to Newspeak and Uniquack*, and Uwe Poerksen’s *Plastic Words: the tyranny of a modular language* (State College: Penn State Press, 1995).

uses it; he kind of bows to some kind of a profession[al] who know[s] more about it. He is convinced that he makes, in some way, a scientific statement. Using the word *makes waves*, but it doesn't hit anything.”⁶ Although a word such as sustainability does not designate anything precisely, it has many suggestive connotations.

As Sajay Samuel argued, scientific terms should not be understood as concepts. Instead, they are constructs. The difference between commonsense concepts and scientific constructs is fundamental. Concepts are grounded in a sensible apprehension of the world, whereas constructs are mental fabrications untethered to the sensible world. For example, ‘the earth’ is a concept whose intelligible content can be grasped by the hand, whereas ‘the planet’ is a construct whose intelligibility can, at best, be visualized in models created by the mind.⁷ As Einstein said of scientific constructs, they “are not however they may seem, uniquely determined by the external world.”⁸ The distinction between concepts and constructs allows one to see why scientific terms easily lend themselves to becoming plastic words. Sustainability is polyvalent and plastic precisely because, as a construct, it is not grounded in felt sensation or perception.

The price paid for scientific constructs can be high. To paraphrase Poerksen, plastic words “sound friendly, smooth, positive, and consensual, but they mask brutality while not in themselves evil. One can ruin an entire region with a word such

6 One can listen to their conversation here: <https://www.davidcayley.com/podcasts/2015/4/19/life-as-idol>. It is also available as a transcript here: <https://www.davidcayley.com/transcripts>.

7 Samuel, Sajay. In *Defense of Vernacular Ways*, In Murton, James, et. al. (Eds.), *Subsistence under Capitalism: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*. (Toronto: McGill University, 2016).

8 Einstein, Albert; Infeld, Leopold. *The Evolution of Physics: The Growth of Ideas from Early Concepts to Relativity and Quanta*. (Cambridge: Touchstone Books, 1967), p.31.

as ‘sustainability.’”⁹ Stated simply, sustainability is unsustainable. I say: to hell with sustainability and hope to celebrate vernacular forms-of-living.

Vernacular forms-of-living

To shift the public debate on sustainability requires challenging myself to think after Ivan Illich, which means both thinking with him – grasping his arguments – and after him – extending his arguments. Accordingly, I collect Illich’s arguments on limits into a conceptual triad to define the space within which vernacular forms-of-living can flourish. Accordingly, I propose that *conviviality* corresponds to limits to technology, whether dominant tools and systems; *commons* correspond to limits to property, whether private or public, and *vernacular* corresponds to limits to scarcity, whether shadow work or paid work. In extending Illich’s argument, I suggest that the political struggle to realize limits to technology, property, and scarcity that are scaled by the human body will necessarily generate social arrangements which, following Agamben, I call vernacular forms-of-living – a life that cannot be separated from its form.

I propose vernacular forms-of-living as a conceptual tool – framed by an inseparable relation between theory and praxis – that can identify, recognize, analyze, and edify social arrangements that embody limits and therefore do not cross natural thresholds. There are several forms-of-living among original peoples grounded in the notions of limits that accord with natural thresholds. *Buen Vivir* or *Vivir Bien*, which Alberto Acosta translated to Spanish, defines ways of living of the Kichwa, Aymara, and Guaraní peoples, for instance, that

9 Pöerksen, Uwe, *ibid.*, p.7

are apparent alternatives to development.¹⁰ Gustavo Esteva has drawn the clear lines for commoning in the new society, and among the Zapotecans and the Zapatistas has called for horizontal grassroots organizations grounded on commotion (to be moved together) instead of promotion (to move someone, as if one is stopped), in which living together means the practice of radical democracy.¹¹

The vernacular is the fabric that spins forms-of-living. A call for vernacular forms-of- living is how I imagined an encounter between Ivan Illich – vernacular (*Shadow Work and Gender*) – and Giorgio Agamben – form-of-life (*The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life* and *The use of Bodies*). Both resuscitated these terms from Latin antiquity and ancient Roman law. Illich traced the vernacular back to the codification by Theodosius, while Agamben found reference to a form-of-life in Cicero, Seneca, and Quintilian, way before the Franciscans.¹²

Ivan Illich breathes new life into the word vernacular, knowing that its ancient meaning carries the seed for what he intends to define. Vernacular designated that everything is woven, cultivated, and made at home, unlike what was sought through the exchange¹³ (Illich, 1981). Thus, vernacular, after Illich, names a range of activities born out of structures of mutual reciprocity, inscribed in each aspect of existence, that are non-market oriented. Vernacular activities can encompass

10 Acosta, Alberto. *O Bem Viver: uma Oportunidade para Imaginar Outros Mundos*. (São Paulo: Autonomia Literária, Elefante, 2016).

11 Esteva, Gustavo. Commoning in the New Society. *Community Development Journal*, vol. 49, Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. i144–59, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26166215>.

12 Illich, Ivan. *Gender*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), p.68. Agamben, Giorgio. *The Omnibus Homo Sacer*. (California: Stanford University Press, 2017) p.963.

13 Illich, Ivan., *The War against Subsistence*, in *Shadow Work*, (London: Marion Boyars, 1981).

the definition of use-value activities, such as cotton fishing net making or growing one's food, and reproduction activities, such as dating, exercising, or reading. The scope of the vernacular encompasses styles of thought in which science is not defined *for* people but rather *by* people, when knowledge is not a scarce resource but a shared commitment to support one another in beautifying the surroundings of communal life.

Giorgio Agamben thoroughly analyzed the monastic rules within the Christian tradition to flesh out a life that is not separated from its form. By freely and willingly committing themselves to the coenobium (where one lives in common), the Christian monk adheres to a *regula vitae* (rule of life), which is not applied to their life. Instead, he produces their way of living since it is produced in it. The faith in Christ, the person, the word made flesh, generated a rule that conforms to His way of living. Even though Tertullian's *regula fidei* (rule of faith) later fed the lines written in the Nicene Creed, the rule was not meant to be a dogma but expresses the effort to follow the nude Christ (Agamben, 2014, p.75). Saint Francis of Assisi insisted that a rule of life is less a prescription of something than the act of following someone. Thus, a form-of-life is not the enforcement of a prescribed norm on life but rather living a life that, while being lived, takes the form that it ultimately seeks – what Agamben names the coincidence of life and form. Saint Clare's 'last will' incarnates the definition of a form-of-life: "I ... wish to follow the life and poverty of our most high Lord Jesus Christ" (Agamben, 2017, p. 967).¹⁴

14 Agamben's argument is that the rule is grounded in the act of following the form-of-living of someone. See Agamben, Giorgio. *Altíssima Pobreza: Regras Monásticas e Forma de Vida*. (São Paulo: Boitempo Editorial, 2014). He also refers to the origin of the rule as a sort of *regula fidei* (rule of faith), in which the monk, living by faith, embodies the wisdom of listening/reading the holy Scriptures (Agamben, 2014, p. 76). The correspondence between the rule and the Scriptures, from where the monks welled out the waters which nourished their quest for truth, is unequivocally expressed in the words directed to those who claim to follow Christ, which appear in the first Epistle

Therefore, thinking after Illich and Agamben, I propose vernacular as the name for the forms-of-living that presuppose limits to property, limits to technology, and limits to scarcity, scaled by the human body. Such limitations are not a set of prescriptions that must be imputed into living as an enforced norm. On the contrary, these limits mark out the zone of abundance that emerges from styles of living that cannot be separated from the forms they take. I call *regula vernaculum* (rule of vernacular) those forms-of-living that enact limits to tools, property, and scarcity scaled by the human body. Thus, limits can foster vernacular forms-of-living, if, and only if, they are lived and set while experienced, not imposed, not prescribed. To live within limits attuned to bodily thresholds embodies vernacular forms-of-living. A call for vernacular forms-of-living is an invitation to celebrate the abundance that can only be found within such limits. More precisely, a call for vernacular forms-of-living is an invitation to opening a social imaginary of thought and fostering peoples' ingenuity to invent ways of living within limits to scarcity (vernacular), technology (conviviality), and property (commons).

Conclusions and provocations

Pax oecologica is the latest front of the war against the vernacular. I borrow the words of Illich to say it with more precision; it is the planetary mission that spreads the "technological imperative transformed into normative responsibility."¹⁵ Driving an electric car will soon become an act of universal responsibility. *Pax oecologica* is the main threat against vernacular forms-of-living. It is grounded on

of Saint John: "He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked."

15 Cayley, David. *Ivan Illich in Conversation*. (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1992), p.287

the assumption that sustainable capitalism is the locomotive speeding us towards social-natural peace. Therefore, it runs over limits to scarcity, technology, and property because it treats these as archaic notions that deter the progress of humanity. Vernacular forms-of-living, like in Walter Benjamin's analysis of revolutions, are the emergency break of this locomotive. They cultivate their unique and colorful meanings of peace that keeps the playful balance between society and nature. Contrary to these modes of violence, *pax populi* protects vernacular forms-of-living.

As Illich once called for de-linking peace and development, I call today for the complete disassociation of peace and sustainability. The abundance of species – seeds, insects, trees, plants, mammals, stones and minerals, gases, waters, and peoples – spread across the various territories will never be 'left in peace' under the crusade of sustainable development or *pax oecologica*. There is no hope, rather total collapse with the invention of a new kind of *homo oeconomicus*, that is, its transmogrification into the *homo oecologicus*. Both are embedded in scarcity, and universal men are made "to live on the consumption of commodities produced elsewhere by others."¹⁶ Both proclaim the insane mechanism of universal ownership. Both play with planet earth as if it was a ball that they could juggle around.

The *regula vernaculum* names the forms-of-living that emerge when people set limits to scarcity (vernacular), property (commons), and tools (conviviality) – each scaled by the human body. The manner of living keeps the spirit of people's peace alive. It constitutes the most radical challenge to *pax oecologica* because it reflects the various arrangements of modern yet proportional societies, each of which protects people's peace. *Regula vernaculum* is the sword against *pax oecologica*.

16 Ibid., p.23