Conversing on the commons: an interview with Gustavo Esteva—part 1

Órla O'Donovan*

This is the first part of an edited transcript of an interview with Gustavo Esteva that took place during a *Thinkery on the Commons* held in Dublin in June 2014, a full version of the recording being available on the journal's companion website CDJ Plus (http://www.oxfordjournals.org/cdjc/cdj-events/commons-sense-a-thinkery-on-the-commons). A contributor to the *Community Development Journal's* Special Supplement on the commons (Esteva, 2014), Gustavo Esteva is a Mexican commons activist and post-development theorist who describes himself as a 'deprofessionalized intellectual'. Advocating an understanding of the commons as first and foremost an activity, a way of people relating to each other and the natural world, rather than a thing or a natural resource, Gustavo asserts that certain kinds of contemporary 'commoning' are the beginnings of a new post-capitalist society. He has two key sources of inspiration: the ideas of the Austrian-born philosopher and ascetic Ivan Illich (1926–2002), and the new way of living and governing of the Mexican Zapatistas. In his view, since the 1994 uprising of indigenous people calling themselves the Zapatista National Liberation Army, the Zapatistas have practiced radical democracy and redefined the good life (Esteva 1992, 2010).

In this first part of the interview Gustavo explains some of the conceptual tools offered by Ivan Illich that can be of use to 'commoners'. Additionally, he explains why he shares Illich's rejection of the project of development, and his commitment to interculturality, the possibility of real dialogue between people with fundamentally different worldviews. Emphasizing that social relationships are fundamental to any community organizing and commoning, he elucidates the interactions with others and technologies that Illich argued characterize a 'convivial' society. The second part of the interview, which will be published in the next issue of the *Community Development Journal* (50(4)), explores different traditions of commons thinking and activism

*Address for correspondence: Órla O'Donovan, School of Applied Social Studies, University College Cork, Ireland; email: o.odonovan@ucc.ie

that are flourishing in various parts of the world today, and their varying perspectives on democracy, the state, the community and the individual.

Thinkering with Ivan Illich's conceptual tools

ÓO'D: Gustavo, thank you so much for making the long journey from Oaxaca to Dublin to be with us today for this Thinkery on the Commons. As you know, we have borrowed the idea of a Thinkery from Ivan Illich who described the centre he established in Mexico in the 1960s as a Thinkery. We've borrowed the idea but are not quite sure what it is.

In opening your contribution (Esteva, 2014) to our publication *Commons Sense – New Thinking About an Old Idea* (McDermott, O'Connell and O'Donovan, 2014) you talk about how 25 years ago Ivan Illich invited you and a group of other friends together to talk about the question 'After development, what?' and that subsequently led to the publication *The Development Dictionary* (Sachs, 1992). By way of introducing yourself to some people here who may be unfamiliar with your work and your own history, please start by telling us about how you came to be part of that circle of friends, and then also, tell us what you think Ivan Illich thought a Thinkery might be.

GE: Ivan was really famous in the beginning of the 1970s because of his books *Deschooling Society* (1971) and *Medical Nemesis* (1976). Many people were coming to visit him in CIDOC (Centro Intercultural de Documentación) in Cuernavaca and I was living 60 km from that place. For us in the Marxist left he was just a reactionary priest and it was not worthwhile reading him. I had no idea about Ivan, not having read a piece of his work in the 1970s.

In the early 1980s I was really lost. I was working and living at the grassroots and very happy in my activity, but not understanding anything. I started thinking because I don't know enough I need to study anthropology, I need to study economics and the more I studied the less I understood. Then one day I took off the lenses of development, the lenses with which I was educated. At the beginning it was like when you are dazzled, and you can't see anything, you can only see shadows. I was really lost. Then a friend invited me to a meeting in Mexico City. I was invited to discuss something about the social construction of energy or something, and Ivan was there. When he started to speak I was immediately captured by him. A friend invited us for dinner, and then that night I could not sleep, reading feverishly everything about Ivan. I feel there is one very important point about Ivan: what I discovered is that Ivan articulates better than any other person the discourse of the people. He's saying the things that the people know and are doing, people at the grassroots, ordinary men and women. Whenever after that I was talking about Ivan's ideas, in the villages, in the barrios, their

reaction was always the 'aha' effect. They knew it already, but they didn't know how to articulate it.

A Thinkery

A Thinkery is basically one element in the process of articulation, how you articulate ideas. It's how to talk about ideas that you do not have. You cannot really say the thing because the idea is not there. It is around but you need to capture it by talking with others, in that relation and that interaction with others. That is one very important element of a Thinkery.

Secondly, CIDOC was the *intercultural* centre of documentation. From the beginning one obsession of Ivan's was the relation between cultures. The basic assumption is that we have never had real dialogue between cultures. What we call dialogue is the imposition of one vision on the other: we will talk in my terms, and then we will use my language, we will use my vision and then I will engage you in my conversation. How can we be open to real dialogue? The word means transcending the *logos*. That meaning implies a real conversation, that you will put your logos to the side, and I will put my logos to the side, and then we will see what happens. Then you are not using your rationality, your language, your vision and I am not using mine. One simple way of saying it is let's see if from heart to heart we can find something. Not from mind to mind, because let's assume that our minds are fundamentally different and we must not impose one mind on the other, one rationality on the other rationality.

Illich was obsessed with interculturality and with the possibility of the dialogue between different people, and dialogue basically implying listening. Listening is not just having the words in your ear but listening and changing, allowing the other to change you. All this is constructed around friendship. Ivan was talking all the time about his fundamental sin of polyfilia, the commitment to friends. This is very pertinent for a Thinkery. In the last years of his life, he was saying all the time 'now I know who I am, because I can see myself in the eyes of my friends'. When you have discovered yourself in the eyes of your friends, it is no longer your construction, your individual construction, but seeing yourself in the other. Of course, with an element of friendship.

ÓO'D: I'm remembering the explanation of hospitality you gave last night, which was accepting the otherness of the other.

GE: It was with Ivan that this idea came. It was in a conversation in Cuernavaca and there were seven of us. Then one moment Ivan said 'Gustavo, if you had only one word to speak, what is to be beyond development, what is the one word you would use?' What came immediately to mind was 'hospitality'. Hospitality is being open to others. I would say something else I think is pertinent for our discussion today: tolerance. It is of course very important

to be tolerant in these times of intolerance. We see intolerance everywhere, and clearly development is very intolerant. But if you see the dictionary, to tolerate is to suffer with patience. The person that tolerates is saying 'okay, you are not the right way, you are undeveloped, you are black, you are whatever, but I am so generous that I will tolerate you'. To tolerate is to insult. You are really dismissing the other by tolerating him or her. Hospitality is not tolerance. It is really opening your arms and your heart and your stomach and everything to the otherness of the other, and not accepting or tolerating the difference, but celebrating it.

Deprofessionalization

ÓOD: Related to that, could I ask you to comment on a few other terms you use that are associated with Illich and that you use in your discussion of the commons? Again by way of introducing yourself, you describe yourself as a 'deprofessionalized intellectual'. What do you mean by that and is it related to the idea of 'disabling professionals'? Also, please say a word about the really central notion of 'conviviality'.

GE: When we are talking about professionalization we are saying two kinds of things. In the opinions of many of us, to de-learn what we have learnt is the most difficult part of our learning. It is not learning something new, but seeing we have been constructed in a certain way, in a professional way. Professional thinking is very difficult because in a real sense it is how you are shaped. You are losing yourself when you are de-professionalizing yourself. We don't see how the profession really shapes us. Every profession has a specific language. The words are the doors and windows to the world, it's how, depending on the word you use, it is how you experience the world. If you are shaped with professional words, your being is a profession. You do not see that your eyes are not your eyes, they are the eyes of the profession. To dismantle that is to dismantle yourself. It is very challenging. By 'deprofessionalized intellectual,' we are talking about that, trying to reclaim our beings beyond the specific shape of a profession.

Another aspect in the idea is really starting a very serious struggle against the dictatorship of the different professions. They are really disabling professions. In that magnificent article by Ivan, he said 'this age can be described as the age of disabling professions', in which every profession is constructed to disable people. There is the saying that a professional is a kind of expert who can transform any situation into a problem, and he is always in the solution. I am using 'he' in a very specific way because it is clearly a patriarchal position. The professional should be a 'he' and a woman should become a 'he' to become a professional. It is this professional who imposes himself, and disables the other person: 'No, you don't know how you are feeling. *I* know how you are feeling, and I am the expert, I am the professional. I will tell you how

you are feeling'. There is now in seven American universities a new professional qualification of bereavement counsellor. It is for people who have suffered the loss of a beloved one, and he or she does not know how to feel. What is the pertinent thing to feel? This counsellor will tell him or her, 'It is okay to feel this or that thing, *not* this or that thing, that's not okay. To feel this is okay'. This is of course the perfect education for consumers. You are educated to consume everything, including the services of professionals. This is what we are trying to say when we say that we are de-professionalized. We are saying two things: to de-learn our being as professionals, and to challenge all the professions.

Conviviality
Connecting these with conviviality, any person that can read *Tools for Conviviality* (Illich, 1973) and can read the explanation of Ivan that he took the word from Brillat-Savarin who used it in relation to gastronomy. He was fully aware that the word is used today to talk about something you have in the pub, when people are drinking and being convivial. But he was trying to give the word a completely new meaning. I think it is pertinent to ask, and this is not Ivan, how we can escape from the Humpty Dumpty syndrome? You know this story from Alice in Wonderland when Humpty Dumpty tells Alice, 'Oh let's have a language in which every word means whatever the person using it wants'. 'Oh great!' says Alice, 'that's magnificent. That's real freedom and creativity, we'll invent all the meanings of the words'. Then Alice stops and says, 'But how will we understand each other if every word has the meaning of the person?' And then Humpty Dumpty answers 'The question is: who is in power here? That will decide the meaning of the word'.

Today one of the main challenges is the crisis of imagination. This implies a need to reinvent our words. We are trying to create a new language, and trying to create it in such a way that it is not technical meanings, it is not the professionals imposing the meanings in the words – that is what they usually do – nor is it science that is basically colonizing our language. Ivan was talking all the time about the amoeba words, that is, how our language is colonized because many of these words are leftovers of science falling into normal conversation, to mean nothing. There are many, many words that we use all the time that mean nothing. They are monumental emptiness. They are now games. You can use magnificent words like 'sex', 'structure', 'problem', but all these words mean absolutely nothing. They are magnificent words for a lecture. The structure of the sexual problems, this kind of talk means nothing, you're saying absolutely nothing. We need to reclaim our words to reclaim our meanings and Ivan was clearly a genius at that.

Austerity

He gave 'conviviality' a new meaning. Very importantly, he was talking about how conviviality applies to tools, not to people. It is not about the relations between people, but how people use tools. Convivial tools are the opposite of industrial tools. Industrial tools are leading us to the world of systems in which we become sub-systems of the systems, and then we can no longer use the tools for our intentions but tools use us for their intentions. If you have convivial tools, the tools cannot use you, but you can use the tools. He also used the word 'austerity' with a completely different meaning to the modern meaning of the word. The person using convivial tools is austere, where austere does not imply eliminating all tools. He talked about 'techno-fasting', meaning fasting from the use of certain technologies that affect your relations with others that prevent you from being with your friends in the proper way. You can now see guys with a cellular in the restaurant; they are not talking to each other but are talking to the cellular. We are using all this technology that is interfering with our personal interactions. When he introduces *Tools for Conviviality*, he is saying how austerity, this peculiar virtue, is not about depriving us of all the enjoyment of wine and women, or men, depending on your preference. It is not depriving you of your interaction with others. It is the virtue of *eutrapelia*, graceful playfulness in your interaction with others. It is beautiful. Graceful, playfulness in the interaction. This is again, one expression of friendship, and how you interact with others in a way that is convivial

References

Esteva, G. (1992) The Zapatistas and people's power, *Capital & Class*, **23** (2), 153–182.

Esteva, G. (2010) From the bottom-up: new institutional arrangements in Latin America, *Development*, **53** (1), 64–69.

Esteva, G. (2014) Commoning in the new society, *Community Development Journal*, Special Supplement, **49** (S1), i144–i159.

Illich, I. (1971) *Deschooling Society*, Calder and Boyars, London.

Illich, I. (1973) *Tools for Conviviality*, Harper & Row, New York.

Illich, I. (1976) *Limits to Medicine – Medical Nemesis: The Expropriation of Health*, Penguin, Middlesex.

McDermott, M., O'Connell and T.O'Donovan, Ó. (eds) (2014) Commons senses. New thinking about an old idea, *Community Development Journal*, Special Supplement, **49** (S1), i1–i159.

Sachs, W. (ed.) (1992) *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power*, Palgrave Macmillan, London.