

ESCAPING EDUCATION

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This article is taken from Turning Points, a book recently published in the USA, which is an anthology of responses to four specific questions from thirty five well-known alternative educators (see the review in this posting). Gustavo Esteva has been a key figure in founding several Mexican, Latin American and international NGOs and coalitions. He is the author of more than thirty books and writes regularly in La Jornada and other leading Mexican newspapers. He is an advisor to the Zapatistas in their negotiations with the government and a strong advocate of Zapatismo.

I learn slowly. Only later in my life did I discover the real meaning and impact of education, when indigenous peoples revealed them to me. My path was rather convoluted, full of bends and unexpected turns and surprises.

The Point of Departure

I got a very conventional education, which seemed to fascinate me. I asked anxiously for it, when I was three years old and my older brother started his school. I wanted to do everything he was doing, and in aping him, I soon learned to read and write. This ability made possible my acceptance in primary school before my sixth birthday, the minimum required in those times.

From the very beginning I added homework to the work prescribed, to accumulate points allowing me to be the first in my group, every week, and to, at the end of the year, receive the Award of Excellence. Getting the highest possible grade became an obsession.

Most activities in the school fascinated me and I followed religiously all its

norms. No critique to the system ever came to my mind, in those years, even when I suffered the consequences of an absurd discipline – when, for example, I was forced to pee in my pants in the classroom because I was not allowed to go to the bathroom, and I remained in my seat, full of shame, at the end of the class.

I was sixteen years old when my father died, and I was forced to work for the sustenance of my family. I then made the foolish decision of adding to that the studies in two universities, in two different professions. I abandoned the first after a couple of years of delirious effort and concluded the second with Summa cum Laude. I was still trapped in the norms.

Apparently, I had no reason to criticise the educational system. Had it prepared me for life and work, as it promised? No doubt! From the very first day in a job I was an obedient, disciplined, hard-working and competitive employee. I soon started to get the reward for my efforts; I was the youngest executive ever in IBM in Mexico; I was Personnel Manager in Procter and Gamble before I was twenty. I also succeeded in Mexican corporations and my own professional bureau. It seemed that the promise of equality offered by education was, in my case, fulfilled. I soon enjoyed ‘social mobility.’ I had been in schools well above my socio-economic level, but once in the business world I advanced quickly, and began to be part of the privileged minority. I did not notice, at that time, the new form of discrimination created by education. My education certificates opened many doors for me, while closing them on those without diplomas. Education had no noticeable impact on my rich classmates, who could fail in it without consequences, but those of my same social class, or of one inferior, who were unable to get good results in the school, or, even worse, who were forced to abandon it for whatever reason, often suffered for the rest of their lives the discrimination usually practised against drop-outs. But far from providing a motive to criticise education, this experience seemed to confirm its value. In the name of justice good education should be extended to everyone, in order to offer equal opportunities to all.

First signs

In the late 1950s, my country and my region were in turmoil. I witnessed great social mobilisations and brutal repression while Che Guevara was awakening us politically, and forging in many of us the moral obligation to attempt revolution in our own social contexts. I started the path of autonomous learning, through conversations with friends and frequent incursions into secondhand bookshops – where I had the fortune of finding for pocket change, books that defined my political and theoretical path for many years.

Challenging the system seemed to have no relationship with my education. I was fired from both IBM and Procter and Gamble because I refused to do things that appeared unjust and indecent. In fact, in spite of my professional and economic success, I abandoned my profession before I was twenty-five years old. It seemed that to live a decent and dignified life, I could no longer work for private corporations or apply what I had learned. Thus, I began one of the most difficult tasks of my life: to de-learn what I had been taught. However, this still did not seem to represent a critique to education itself, only to its orientation, imposed by the dominant economic and political regime. The latter was the evil, not education, and once we were able to change its nature and direction there would be no reason to worry about it: we would get the proper education for everyone and thus equity and justice.

In the sixties, when my first daughter became school age, I looked around for a good public or private school, an institution to which I could entrust my beloved child. I could not find any in Mexico City, and since other friends were in the same predicament, we invented one. We mixed up a marvellous cocktail, without own creativity – a lot of Freinet, some Montessori, a little bit of Steiner and the Waldorf Schools, some Summerhill, and more. It was really beautiful. In the first bulletin of the school, quickly improvised by the children and their parents, our intention became explicit: ‘A link between the useless traditional education and the privilege of raising children in freedom, able to love their own lives.’ Every year we added a grade, for my daughter to continue her studies. She

enjoyed the experience; however, when she finished high school, we closed the school. Both my daughter and her parents knew by that time that the problem was not the quality of the school but the school itself. No matter how much we redesigned the classroom and the curriculum, no matter how free our school was, how beautiful the trees and the garden that substituted for a classroom, how open and creative the teachers, our school was still a school. My daughter did not follow university studies and I was forced to being my exploration of alternative paths.(1)

In the late seventies, I began to live and work in autonomous niches at the grassroots level. Through a series of NGOs, a group of friends and I attempted to work directly with the people – with peasants in the countryside and marginals in the cities, with all the usual ‘untouchables.’ We learned far more with the ‘untouchables’ than with the experts and the rulers, and with them, we began enjoying a different kind of freedom and autonomy. Increasingly, however, I found myself confused and puzzled. With all the formal categories of my education, I could not make any sense of my daily experience. For some time, I assumed I needed to study more, to do more extensive academic research. So at a furious pace, I studied the latest theories of economics, sociology, anthropology and political science, and my confusion grew. There were times, I must confess, when I even assumed that the problem was not with the theoretical models that fascinated me, but that reality needed to change in order to fit into all the beautiful, neat, academic, theoretical categories of the brilliant experts of Development and Education!

Then one day, in spite of myself and my education, my lenses of development just fell off. Dazzled, blind, mute, I groped for words, for different doors of perception, of thought. The lenses of development – whether tinted Left or Right, Republican or Democrat, Marxist or Fascist, capitalist or socialist – could not help me see or understand the complex worlds of real people living real lives.

Then two things happened. First, I started to remember. When I was a child I had asked to be sent to Oaxaca with my Zapotec grandmother, to enjoy my holidays with her. Remembering what she taught me by her very being, in the market

where she tended a stall, I began the slow, very slow, path of remembering my own people.

Second, I met Ivan Illich.

CIDOC was just forty miles from my place in Mexico City. Ivan, internationally renowned and infamous, drawing brilliant intellectuals and activists from all over the world, did not draw us from Mexico's Left. For us, he was just a reactionary priest; his fields – education, health, transportation – were irrelevant, mere services we would deal with once we were in power, after eliminating capitalist exploitation. Look from the Left, we were convinced that Illich's focus on education or health was a mistake or a rightist trick (2).

In 1983 I was invited to a seminar in Mexico City on the social construction of energy with Wolfgang Sachs. Ivan was there. I was mesmerized. That very night, I embarked on my Illich studium. A little later, I started to collaborate with him. Still later, slowly, we became friends.

My fascination with Ivan was born out of the fact that his ideas, his words and his writings were a brilliant intellectual presentation of ordinary people's common discourse. He was describing ways of living and being that I encountered all the time; in my grandmother's world, the world of other indigenous peoples, the world of *campesinos* or *marginales*. 'Vernacular' and 'convivial', two words that are central to Ivan's work, were magnificent symbols for my people's worlds. I heard them there first, in all those pre-Illich years, when I felt and sensed and smelled and touched and experienced those words and what they symbolised, in the villages, at the grassroots.

Ivan once said that 'people can see what scientists and administrators can't.' And he said something more: that the people in our countries, rather than the dissident elite in the advanced ones, were the ones implementing the political inversion he conceived in *Tools for Conviviality* (1973) (3). People are '*just using their brains and trusting their senses*' and that was exactly my experience. Using Ivan's terminology and concepts I was able to see very clearly what ordinary, common people were doing.

What to do?

I joined up with several friends in the 1980s and launched a public campaign asking for a legislation that would punish, with ten years of prison, any person producing any diploma or asking another person for any kind of certification of studies, to apply for a job or for whatever. I had no hope of getting my legislation passed, but I wanted public debate and I got it. Most people said: If we pass your stupid legislation 99% of the children will abandon school, whatever grade they are in. That sentiment revealed what I wanted to make evident, that in Mexico, at least, people go to school or parents send their children to it only to get the diploma. Most people know that the school is not an appropriate place to learn; it is a place to get an institutional certification, a kind of visa which allows you to circulate in modern society. Even our magnificent school was not a good place to learn.

And it was even less of a good place for children to live and flourish. Years later, I attempted the other extreme: to give diplomas to everyone (4). We still have political campaigns, for example against compulsory education. But we are not using too much time or resources in such campaigns. We are, rather, dedicated to implementing our own initiatives.

Reclaiming our freedom to learn

The impact of the Zapatista uprising in 1994 was immense in Oaxaca, the state where I live and the only state in Mexico where the majority of the population is indigenous, one of the poorest according to conventional indicators, and the richest in terms of natural and cultural diversity – sixteen indigenous peoples coexist there, and among them the *mestizos*. Their struggle forced the government to enact laws, in 1995, to acknowledge their own system of government and their autonomy. A little later, those peoples created a public forum to articulate their voices and give to them appropriate visibility.

In 1997 this forum offered a public declaration, after long reflection and debate, denouncing school as the main tool of the state to destroy indigenous cultures.

The scandal produced with this manifesto was compounded with the discovery that some communities were closing the schools. Very few were acquainted with the findings of a young anthropologist who, after applying the proper tests, discovered that the unschooled children were better prepared than the schooled ones in all but one aspect: the latter knew how to sing the national anthem (Maldonado, 1998).

People from those communities later shared with me their concern that their young men and women, after learning all they could from the immediate community, would not be able to continue their studies because they had no institution certification. We thus created, with them and for them, Universidad de la Tierra en Oaxaca, a space where those young indigenous men and women will be able to learn whatever they want to learn without previous schooling or any documentation. This space has evolved a lot in its first years of life. We have learned a lot. We currently define the experience as a space dedicated to learning, study, reflection and action. Our efforts are focused on actions of social transformation aimed at rooting, strengthening and expanding the convivial way of life and radical democracy.

Unitierra practises and enriches intercultural dialogue through learning stays in which people from different communities, cultures and countries interact and reflect each other.

Our learning style emphasises practice. We learn by doing what we want to learn with the people who are practising it in the field. The members of Unitierra follow their self-directed path of learning, at their own pace, and in the field of learning they choose. The fields of learning define spheres of common interest. They can be theoretical: social movements, the nature of the current crisis, the challenges of democracy; or practical: video production, appropriate technology, alternative therapies and urban agriculture, among others.

Those who wish to learn at Unitierra can begin to do so at any time, without any preconditions. They do not need to demonstrate certification of prior studies.

We classify our practical initiatives as the expression of specific struggles: for

cultural regeneration; food sovereignty; free, autonomous interaction; and reclaiming tools. The main fields of learning that exist in Unitierra include the theoretical and practical aspects of a convivial way of life and learning how to live it, facing together the challenges that it represents and sharing our practical experiences on eating, healing, learning, settling, intertwining and others. In the area of tools, by designing, creating, reproducing and employing tools that expand our capabilities in daily life; and in the area of autonomous media, to conceive, construct, organise and operate means of interaction with other people and groups. Reflection in Action is the name we give to all the documented, disciplined, rigorous public and critical activities that allow us to reflect on the reality in which we are immersed, on our own activities and on the experiences of other people and groups.

And friendship?

At the end of *Deschooling Society*, where he elaborates on his not very smart proposals, Ivan wrote:

What characterises the true master-disciple relationship is its priceless character. Aristotle speaks of it as a ‘moral type of friendship, which is not in fixed terms: it makes a gift or does whatever it does, as to a friend.’ Thomas Aquinas says of this kind of teaching that inevitably it is an act of love and mercy. This kind of teaching is always a luxury for the teacher and a form of leisure (in Greek ‘*schole*’) for him and his pupil: an activity meaningful for both, having no ulterior purpose.

(1970b, p101)

That is the main point in friendship. Gratis. Not only because there is no economic exchange involved, but because you are doing what you are doing for the joy of it, having no ulterior purpose. Gratis. Learning together is not a means towards an end, but an end in itself, for the joy of it. It is a pleasure to do it with friends, as an expression of friendship. The ‘students’ coming to Unitierra are not our friends. When we put them in contact with a person doing what they want to learn, they are not friends. We know very well that you cannot create friendship. You cannot force it. Furthermore, you cannot befriend everybody. There is always a personal element of mutual attraction for friendship to be possible.

Austerity has been a key element in the creation of a social environment in which friendship emerges and flourishes. Austerity, as Aquinas clarified, is a virtue that does not exclude our delight. It does not exclude wine and women. It only excludes those delights degrading personal relationship. Austerity often includes techno fasting, renouncing anything than an be an obstacle for friendship, excluding any tool or technology that can create a distance between friends. Austerity, as a virtue, wrote Ivan thirty years ago, 'is part of another virtue, which is more fragile and embraces and overcomes it; joy, eutrapelia¹, friendship.' (1975, México: Posada, 1978, p 16)

We are not, in Unitierra, a community of friends. Notwithstanding, friendship is always at the very centre of our activities. Friendship flourishes in every corner. If one of our friends does not feel he is comfortable with an apprentice or thinks he cannot befriend him or her, he may call us to ask for a change. Any 'student' can do the same. We need such flexibility and openness to walk our own path. While creating a situation in which no condition for learning is scarce, our challenge becomes how to deal with the affluence of joy and friendship which may overwhelm us. And there, more and more, we discover ourselves, who we are, in the eyes of our friends.

Escaping education?

Are we escaping education?

We don't know exactly what we are doing, but we nourish the hope that we are creating and discovering alternatives to education. Yes, we are coming back from the future, living in the present, living in our own places, not in search of any kind of mobility which will take us to the centres of power of the global economy.

Like John Holt, I don't like the word *education*. I am convinced that we can abandon it. Escaping education has become, for many of us, a very profound path of liberation.

¹ Ease and urbanity of conversation

Ivan Illich often celebrated the master-pupil relationship. What he opposed was trapping such a relationship inside a curriculum, a program, a teaching, an ideology, a plan, a goal. The master is not trying to transfer certain knowledge or skills to the pupil. He or she has no educational goals for the student, is not interested in transforming the student into something. The master loves their student with a caring love, no strings attached, and while he or she may nourish hopes about the pupil, does not hold onto expectations.

'True learning,' Ivan once said, 'can only be the leisurely practice of free people.' In the consumer society he also said, we are either prisoners of addiction or prisoners of envy. Only without addiction or envy, only without educational goals, in freedom, can we enjoy true learning.

Our audacity, our playfulness, our non-suicidal Luddite-ism, our creative ways of swimming against the modern current in order to enjoy regenerating our traditions – all of these help to explain our recent adventures, like Unitierra. Yes, we can do everything we are doing without it, without the institution, but playing with the symbols of the system is not only an expression of humour, it is also a kind of protection. What we are doing is highly subversive. In a sense we are subverting all and every institution of the modern, economic society. The expanding dignity of every one of us, every one of our relationships necessarily challenges existing systems (Illich 1970a, p. 19). In packaging our activities as one of the most respected sacred cows of modernity – education – we protect our freedom from the attacks of the system. We don't want to be accused of being terrorists!

In my place, every I is a We. And thus we live together, in our living present, rooted in our social and cultural soil, nourishing hopes at a time in which all of us, inspired by the Zapatistas, are creating a whole new world.

(1) For full disclosure, I must say that my second daughter, six years younger than the first, was basically educated by her mother, a professional educator, after our divorce when she was only one year old. She was loyal to school and

got a college degree.

(2) Ivan described our attitude in 1970: 'We are used to considering schools as a variable, dependent on the political and economic structure. If we can change the style of political leadership, or promote the interest of one class or another, or switch from private to public ownership of the means of production, we assume the school system will change as well.' (Illich 1970a, p 73). But we did not read him then.

(3) 'In the last words of that book,' Ivan commented to David Cayley, 'I said that I knew in which direction things would happen but not what would bring them to that point. At that time I believed in some big, symbolic event, in something similar to the Wall Street crash. Instead of that, it is hundreds of millions of people just using their brains and trusting their senses. We now live in a world in which most of those things that industry and government do are misused by people for their own purposes.' (Cayley 1992, p 117)

(4) At one point, on our local TV station in Oaxaca, we were talking about the horrendous damage produced by sewage and how the flush toilet was spoiling our lives. In discussing the politics of shit, we were examining the advantages of an ecological dry toilet, designed by a friend. It was fantastic, not only because it helped you to dispose responsibly of your own shit, radically cancelling out very dirty shitwork, but also to disconnect your stomach from any public or private centralized bureaucracy. Because of the extended requests for dry toilets, we organized intensive five-day courses through which all kinds of people learned everything about that trade. At the end of every course, we gave every participant a magnificent diploma, with golden letters, recognizing them as 'Experts in alternative sanitation, with a specialisation in dry toilets.' This approach helped implement the construction of 100,000 dry toilets in Oaxaca, Mexico. Knowing about these courses, the TV station asked us if they could be present for the last day of one of them, to interview some of the participants. We saw later, on TV, a conversation between two of them:

I don't understand this world . . . I am an architect. I have been unable to find a job since I graduated, three years ago, after twenty years of studies. And now, after

only five days of enjoying myself in this fascinating workshop, I have three very good job proposals, in a very dignified position, and my family is telling me: ‘You finally learned something really useful!’

Another example. We had many traditional healers in Oaxaca. We thought it was a good idea together them for an exchange of the experiences of their forty-eight different healing practices. There they were, enjoying themselves. After three days of the workshop, we gave them beautiful diplomas certifying their attendance. We repeated the experience the next year. A little later, I was visiting a friend in the middle of the jungle of the Chimalapas. Upon entering his hut, I discovered on the wall, very well framed, the two diplomas. This healer was also enjoying his mirthful mimicry of medical doctors who cover their walls with official diplomas and certificates of every stripe.

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