

The Return of Subsistence Knowledges

Majid Rahnema, Jean Robert

In *Medical Nemesis*, first published in French in 1975, Ivan Illich wrote:

The acute problems of manpower, money, access, and control that beset hospitals everywhere can be interpreted as symptoms of a new crisis in the concept of disease. This is a true crisis because it admits of two opposite solutions, both of which make present hospitals obsolete. The first solution is a further sickening medicalization of health care, expanding the clinical control of the medical profession over the ambulatory population. The second is a critical, scientifically sound de-medicalization of the concept of disease¹

Much of this analysis of the crisis affecting clinical medicine at the middle of the 1970s could be applied to the examination of the “economic crisis” now facing the world. What societies need first is to reexamine the destructive effects of a globalized system of economic domination on the livelihood of human beings; it is only then that the search can begin for entirely new organic links with the reality that the Greeks designated by the verb *oikodomeo*, meaning “I manage my and my family’s own livelihood.” It is from that verb that the Western world has derived the contemporary words *economy* and *economics*, giving them a meaning diametrically contrary to the verb’s meaning.

The author of *Medical Nemesis* also wrote:

Medical epistemology is far more important for the healthy solution of this crisis than either medical biology or medical technology. Such an epistemology will have to clarify the logical status and the social nature of diagnosis and therapy [...]²

¹ *Medical Nemesis. The Expropriation of Health*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1976, p. 166.

² *Ibid.*

Analogically, an epistemology based on the history of economic ideas seems to us far more important than all the micro- and macro-economics presently proposed as a rapid “solution” of the crisis. To quote a thought attributed to Albert Einstein, “one cannot solve our problems with the same thinking with which we created them.”

Be Fearful of Fear

To search for the true causes of the present crisis requires therefore warding oneself from the panic fear foisted by economic experts wanting people to believe that the “solution” requires more measures from their domain of expertise. The path to the truth about the economy is rather an invitation to *touch the ground*, that is, to ask radical questions about all the “received ideas.” It is also to painfully, and sometimes joyfully, recover the perception of concrete things: not only how hard it can be to make a living, but also of the soil and of the other elements and of the ever-open possibility of conviviality. It means cleansing one’s vision of fashionable mirages and, perhaps, of an excess of abstractions, to remember and to rediscover how, for millennia, the poor have actually been able to defy misery and destitution by obtaining directly from nature and their human surroundings most of what they needed for their livelihood. Not in solitude, but in solidarity. Not by competing with one another for increasing productivity and personal profit but by intensifying their human and convivial bonds with others to redefine their living riches according to Necessity.

As beautifully formulated by R.M. MacIver, in his preface to the now classic work of Karl Polanyi, what was almost sacred was to protect the “inner temple of human life” from being spoiled and violated.³ What modern economists refer to, often with a tone of disdain, as their

³ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, Beacon Press, p. 3.

“subsistence economy” was far from being an “underdeveloped” way of living. To paraphrase Mahatma Gandhi, it was not an “*egonomy*” created by *homo oeconomicus* and its descendants, but a most diversified and creative search by convivial men and women for new forms of “living riches,” as opposed to the “dead riches”⁴ of money and profits.

For the great majority of men and women throughout history, to lead a subsistence life has therefore never represented an “underdeveloped” or shameful mode of living. Even in more specific “economic” terms, it has mainly consisted in producing what one eats and to eat what one produces. Where there is free land, water, and sun, it can always be done, and does not require academic titles. It only needs a perception of one’s human condition respectful of Necessity, and empirical knowledges appropriate to the place, borne out of common sense, and the fruit of everyone’s experiences; in other words, knowledges and practices adequate to their possibilities and impossibilities, and appropriate to a place’s specific climate and to the human culture nourished by its soil. Let’s call them *subsistence knowledges*.

Stubborn proponents of total market dependency, and hence of the extinction of all subsistence knowledges, still abound in the circles of professional economists and their fundamentalist followers among Third World politicians. But do the “First World scientists” and their political flocks in poor countries understand what they despise and eventually repress? The economists’ answer is that economy is a game in which all should be able to win the money necessary to get from the market the goods and services that will satisfy their basic needs: a few to lead a life of luxury and comfort, and the very few to show off a material wealth that no past society could even have dreamt of.

⁴ The distinction between these two forms of “riches” has been beautifully described by Mowlana Jalal-ad-Din Rumi in all his poems.

They have generally no difficulty to recognize that this disparity is unjust. Yet, they argue that the question of justice must be carefully distinguished from economic efficiency. They would be ready to recognize that economy is a kind of lottery, but they say: “let’s be realistic, there is an optimal level of injustice in which the situation of the least favored participant in the economy is better than it would be with less injustice.”⁵ There are two arguments involved in what we just wrote and it is important to differentiate them. The first deals with the fundamental question of injustice. A good number of economists are ready to recognize that economics, “the dismal science,” is inherently unjust. Yet, as soon as this is acknowledged, it is argued that some degree of injustice fosters an increase in productivity, as a result of which, some of the wealth of the richest trickles down to the poorest. The second argument, seldom clearly stated by economists, is based on the recognition that, in modern economic society, one generally produces one thing in order to obtain something else. For instance, I want a full basket of good things for my family at the end of the month; but in order to obtain it, I have to be filling formularies in an office, or working in an armament plant or in a cigarette factory: I can only obtain my family’s basket through a *detour*. To sum up, still more than injustice, the *detour of production* characterizes the modern economy. Jean-Pierre Dupuy has written:

Some work, for instance, in the production of death engines in order to obtain a “worth” – their health – that in a large measure they could have produced in an autonomous way, for instance by living a healthier and more hygienic life.⁶

In another work, the same author had stated:

⁵ Superficially influenced by Rawls’ theory of justice - see John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999 [1971] – many economists would argue that, in order for a society to afford an optimal affluence for its poorest member, it has to maintain an optimal level of injustice such structured that it be beneficial to him.

⁶ Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *Pour un catastrophisme éclairé. Quand l’impossible est certain*, Paris : le Seuil, 2002, p. 38, 39, our translation.

When one is animated by the spirit of the detour, one may fall into its trap and end up losing sight of the fact that the detour is, precisely, only a detour. When one steps back while looking in the opposite direction, one runs the risk of forgetting one's objective and, seeing one's regression as progress, of taking the means for ends.⁷

Jean-Pierre Dupuy is a top mathematical economist who became a philosopher. As such, he might be the only member of the economic guild to have clearly revealed that the foundation of modern economy rests on the *detour of production*, or, more exactly, “the sway that it holds over people's minds.”⁸ For him, all modern economies are based on the unlimited lengthening of detours of production, and on the concomitant destruction of subsistence practices. In other words, the detour of production is the battering ram of the war against subsistence.

However, the capacity to make detours – stepping back in order to spring farther or refraining from eating all the harvest in prevision of the winter – is inherent to human intelligence, yet; everything indicates that the primary finality of industrial economies is no longer the production and storage of goods, but *the production of production detours*, that means *work for the production of the need of more “necessary” work*. If it is so, Dupuy concludes, industrial society has become stupid for being too clever. Let us examine both arguments successively; that is, let's firstly reflect on the inherent injustice of the economic system, and then on its propensity to multiply production detours and to destroy the forms of traditional subsistence that would make these detours unnecessary.

I. Himalayas of Wealth Alongside Abysses of Misery

⁷ Jean-Pierre Dupuy, "Detour and Sacrifice: Ivan Illich and René Girard," Lee Hoinacki and Carl Mitcham, ed., *The Challenges of Ivan Illich. A Collective Reflection*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002, p. 194.

⁸ Ibid.

By now, even the most ideologically blinded economist begins to suspect that the economy is a machine that produces unfathomable levels of wealth on the one hand and abysses of misery on the other. This last sentence requires some explanations. Let us state clearly that, for us, misery is not poverty. As Proudhon has written long ago, “poverty has been the normal condition of man in civilization.” For Michel Mollat and the exceptional team of historians who contributed to his classic work on the subject⁹, it appears also that, while misery and destitution could be considered as accidents in human history, poverty has been a normal mode of living and a way of preventing such accidents. Since this historical evidence is seldom taught in modern universities and institutions dealing with the complex realities of the poor, one could easily reach the appalling conclusion that the dominant and prevailing trends in “modern economic sciences” suffer from an acquired syndrome of selective blindness to all traditional, empirical, hardly mathematizable forms of the livelihood of man. The very fact that today, the world’s most recognized economists serving the World Bank and similar institutions have come to redefine THE POOR of all lands as every person who lives with less than two dollars a day, is a preposterous example of this syndrome.

One could imagine that, in years to come, the historians of economic ideas will wonder at the fact that, before the fall of 2008, such professional economists had lost sight of what most of their forerunners, in particular the founders of the new science of “economy” had seen with much clarity. One might attribute that to the fact that those pioneers of modern economics in the late XVIIIth and early XIXth century did not consider themselves professional economists in today’s sense, but as philosophers like Burke did, or as a moral analyst of human sentiments like Smith did, or political men as thought Townsend, or as Bentham thought of himself, as businessmen eventually capable of getting profits from the administration of poor houses. With the possible exception of Smith, they did not think that the rich’s wealth was ever to be shared with the poor. The sentence that disturbs their modern heirs, when we pronounce it, would not have shocked Burke, nor Townsend, nor Bentham. Here is our sentence: “Modern economics is the blueprint of social arrangements that

⁹ Michel Mollat, *The Poor in the Middle Ages: An Essay in Social History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

simultaneously produce summits of wealth that no previous epochs could have imagined and abysses of misery of which there was no experience either.” We can reformulate it in various guises, for instance: “Misery accompanies wealth as shadow accompanies light.” “The economy offers men to lead them into affluence and foments at the same time forms of scarcity that engender new miseries.” “The richer a society, the less able its members become of the relations of mutuality that were natural to the historical poor and were the basis of their subsistence.” Or, in John M’Farlane’s words, in his meditations on the growing poverty of the richest nation of the XVIIIth century, England: “The greatest number of poor is not to be found in barren countries or amidst barbarous nations, but in those which are the most fertile and the most civilized.”¹⁰

Perhaps that we begin to glimpse the truth concealed by modern economic knowledge: A rich nation must suppress its traditional subsistence relations so the motor of its economy can start buzzing. Contrary to the water that seeps through the coffee in a percolator, the form of affluence that is peculiar to the rich does not trickle through society to reach the poor, as Adam Smith believed it would. Jeremy Bentham, the first entrepreneur who was able to realize a profit from the administration of a poor house organized like a model prison¹¹ never gave credit to Smith’s archaic “percolation” theory to which, before last fall’s awakening, many modern economists had found convenient to give lip service. With a cynicism that would ruin any modern politician’s electoral prospects, Jeremy Bentham could affirm that the government’s task was not to alleviate misery but “to increase want in order to make the physical sanction of hunger effective.”¹² He urged the rich who had been misled on the ruts of benevolence to acknowledge that “[i]n the highest stage of social prosperity, the great mass of the citizens will most probably possess few other resources than their daily labor, and consequently will always be near to indigence.”¹³ Joseph Townsend is still more precise when he states that only the threat

¹⁰ John M’Farlane, *Enquiries Concerning the Poor*, 1772.

¹¹ See Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1957 [1944], p. 106, 121.

¹² See Karl Polanyi, op. cit., p. 117.

¹³ Ibid.

of misery and hunger allow men deemed by their condition to servile work to inure themselves to the hardships of wars and the seas' inclemency: "For what is it but distress and poverty which can prevail upon the lower classes of the people to encounter all the horrors which await them on the tempestuous ocean or on the field of battle?"¹⁴

Burke, author of a theory of the sublime, stated with compunction that all inclinations to help the poor stem from absurd principles that pretend to accomplish what, by the very constitution of the world, is impracticable. "When we affect to pity as poor those who must labor or the World cannot exist, we are trifling with the condition of mankind."¹⁵ The true difficulty, he explains, is not to succor the hungry, but to contain the impetuosity of the rich's benevolence. And, again, the authoritative voice of Reverend Joseph Townsend: "Hunger will tame the fiercest animals, it will teach decency and civility, obedience and subjection, to the most perverse. In general, it is only hunger which can spur and goad them [the poor] on to labor."¹⁶

The Church apologized to Giordano Bruno for having burnt him at the stake, to Galileo for having condemned him to house arrest, but the Economy has never apologized to the poor. Today, it has learnt to conceal its structural cynicism behind a mask of *evergetism*,¹⁷ taking this last word in its literal sense of do-gooding, doing as if one were good, with ostentation and from the summits of power. Before last Fall, the economy's inherent injustice as well as the lengthening of production detours —and the concomitant destruction of subsistence practices opposing these detours —could be legitimized by the spurious argument that, as long as the

¹⁴ Edmund Burke, *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*, 1795.

¹⁵ See Karl Polanyi, op. cit., p. 118.

¹⁶ Joseph Townsend, *Dissertation on the Poor Laws*, 1784, quoted in Karl Polanyi, op. cit., p.113.

¹⁷ The term 'evergetism' (Gk: to do good deeds) was popularized by the French historian Paul Veyne to describe the practice of the wealthy in ancient societies of Greece and Rome to donate some of their wealth to the community. (eds)

global heap was growing, at the end, there would be money, goods, services and jobs for everybody. We can see now how stupid it was to believe it.

It is possible that, in the months or years, the pilots of the economic machine will succeed in leading it out of the turbulent zone in which it is presently enmeshed. However, it must be feared that, in the name of security, the levels of social control, the persecution of autonomies and the repression of dissidences will be increased, encroaching in new ways upon the freedom margins of simple citizens like you and us. But there is something still more disquieting in wait.

II. The Systematization of the Production Detour and the War Against Subsistence

There is indeed a deeper reality, for the denouncement of which there are still hardly words. This reality is the war waged by the West against the subsistence of the rest: of the natives of the non-European parts of the world and of the poor in all parts. As Michel Foucault said, this war resembles a fight between a vulgar iron pot and a beautiful piece of ceramics. It is the war between economic and subsistence practices, economics vs subsistence knowledges. To analyze this war, it is necessary to go beyond the adjective “capitalist” and to examine what it qualifies: economics itself, that is, according to schoolbook definitions, “the allocation of limited means to alternative (read: unlimited) ends” or “the formation of values under the constraint of scarcity.” Scarcity is the tension between the limitedness of the means and the unlimited character of the ends. As soon as the economy is defined in terms of scarcity and values, it is irremediably capitalistic, and attempts to redeem it from its inherent violence by means of state interventions might momentarily and locally curb it, but they will never change its nature. It is not possible to proclaim preemptorily that the economy must be put again “at the service of man” or that, since it emerged from our actions, we can correct its defects like we do of a tool. Nor can

we affirm, as it is done by some anti-establishment politicians, that the machine was manipulated in the shadow by a number of evil beings and therefore to assume that it would be enough to replace economy by something else in order to put it back entirely at our disposal.¹⁸

Re-humanizing the economy seems to be as utopian a goal as making the automobile and its highways friendly to pedestrians. But what cannot be radically changed can be contained.

Another reflection by Ivan Illich inspires us here:

Social scientists can build a computer model of traffic in Calcutta or Santiago, and engineers can design monorail webs according to abstract notions of traffic flow. Since these planners are true believers in problem solving by industry, the real solution for traffic congestion is beyond their grasp. Their belief in the effectiveness of power blinds them to the disproportionately greater effectiveness of abstaining from its use. Traffic engineers have yet to combine in one simulation model the mobility of people with that of vehicles.¹⁹

Traffic engineers are totally blind to autonomous mobility and hence to the synergy of autonomy and heteronomy which is the “really existing traffic.” In the best of the cases, they acknowledge walking or biking as forms of “cheap and primitive transportation,” and for which motorized vehicles have to be substituted as soon as possible, naturally, as always in their wooden language, “for people’s good.” Their blindness leads them to plan the mess of late industrial traffic, in which congestion becomes a general condition and where planned *detours* play the role of the multiplication of the epicycles with which late Ptolemaic astronomers attempted to put an obsolete theory in accordance with the facts.

Traffic, that is the synergy of *transit* (term used by Illich to define *autonomous mobility*, which is non-economic and non-bureaucratized) and *transport* is a very apt metaphor for a relation for which economists have no term because all their professional training aims at making

¹⁸ Florence Aubenas y Miguel Benasayag, *Résister c'est créer*, Paris: La Découverte, 2002, p. 109 (free translation by the authors.)

¹⁹ Ivan Illich, *Energy and Equity*, New York: Harper & Row, 1974, p. 53, 54.

them selectively blind to it.²⁰ It is the synergy between two forms of obtaining the necessities of daily life, one of which is autonomous, non-economic in the modern sense and as little administrable as transit or autonomous mobility, and another which is *heteronomous* as transport, economic in the sense of “submitted to the iron law of scarcity,” and in need of administration and social control. These two forms of obtaining the necessities can be called, respectively, *subsistence* and *economy*. Their synergy is the concrete *livelihood of man* with all its tribulations and joys. *Economics* is a taught and prestigious blindness to subsistence, just as *transportation science* is a cultivated blindness to people’s autonomous power to move around. In the industrial variety of traffic, transport or heteronomous mobility encroaches upon transit, or autonomous mobility to the point of making it dangerous and finally insignificant, according to the engineers’ and economists’ self-fulfilling prophecies. In the form of human livelihood imposed upon people by capitalism, the synergy between subsistence and economy has become negative to the point that the destruction of whatever remains of subsistence capacity has become the first condition of any revamping of economic growth, with its cancerous proliferation of production detours and its war against all remnants of autonomous subsistence.

III. For Whom Do the Bells of the “Crisis” Ring?

What we call “the crisis” is a moment in which the economic lottery has even fewer consolation prizes for the poor, reduced privileges for the average well-to-do, while the cards distributed to the top players are rearranged in a way to allow the game to produce, on the one side a new poor, and on the other, a new type of riches for which the words millions and billions

²⁰ “The discussion of how energy is used to move people requires a formal distinction between transport and transit as the two components of traffic. By *traffic*, I mean any movement of people from one place to another. By *transit*, I mean those movements that put human metabolic energy to use, and by *transport* that mode of movement which relies on other sources of energy,” Ivan Illich, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

are what a village accountant is to Microsoft's financiers. There are several numerical ways to express these new disparities. Unfortunately, their many indicators are generally incompatible. They rarely state clearly if the word "riches" refers to wealth or income, and in general, they seem to intentionally discourage comparisons. Here are some examples of this dance of numbers: "The group of the 300,000 richest Americans possess as much wealth as the poorest 150 million." "The 500 world's richest have as much as the poorest 416 million." "In 2007, global military expenditures amounted to 1,339 billion dollars."²¹ According to the World Bank, the poor represent 56% of the World population: 1.2 billion earn less than 1 dollar daily, and 2.8 billion, less than 2 dollars.²² Today, in the United States, prototype of a country with subsidized agriculture,²³ the poorest dedicate up to 16% of their income to feeding themselves. By contrast, in many countries of the South, households dedicate half of their income to this purpose, and in not few cases, up to 75%. Everything seems to indicate that capitalism is preparing a huge paupericide.²⁴

²¹ *Le Monde*, June 11 2008. Are one thousand billion a trillion of a zillion?

²² Deepa Narayan, *Moving out of Poverty: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on Mobility*, New York: Palgrave, Macmillan, World Bank, 2007.

²³ According to documents presented at the *Heads of State Meeting* of Johannesburg in 2002, in 2001, the industrial countries of the North subsidized their farmers for a total amount of 350 billion dollars - that is about one billion dollars daily - to allow them to export their produces to poor countries, making these dependent on alimentary commodities whose price is defined by stock exchange gambles. Legalized by economic and political powers, and supported by professional do-gooders, this *dumping* contributes both to destroy the subsistence basis of the poor and to oblige them to expanding production detours, starting with ever longer commuting times. But what do we hear, now that the price of grains and other forms of basic food is rising in the world's markets? Incredulous, we hear political leaders of the South announce that they will reduce customs duties to allow their people to continue eating imported food.

²⁴ See the statistics presented by Frances Moore Lappé, *World Hunger: 12 Myths*, New York: Grove Press, 2004 and *Getting a Grip: Clarity & Courage in a World Gone Mad*, Chelsea Green Publishing, 2007. The *dumping* practiced by rich nations subsidizing their agriculturists looks as if it were a world-wide operation aiming at suffocating the poor, particularly subsistence peasants. However, in the data presented to the public, it is constantly stated that "due to the present urgency," only a modernized agriculture can feed the world population. What the manipulators of statistics conceal, is that 1) not long ago, traditional agriculture was still able to feed most of the people, and that 2) even in its present status of only very partial modernization, the world's agriculture produces enough to feed twice the world population.

Granted that such disparities in wealth and incomes, the amounts dedicated to armaments, publicity, or subsidies allowing the farmers of the rich countries to smash the poor countries' agriculture are blatant injustices.²⁵ But the apparent objectivity of cold numbers conceals a still more disquieting reality, which is the destruction of people's autonomous abilities, the economists' blindness to that destruction, in short: the war against subsistence waged by market economies.

The *Potentia* of the Poor

In a book that was published a few months ago²⁶, we acknowledged these disparities and their alarming growth, and tried to show clearly how the injustices inherent to the widening gulf between rich and poor were the result of a dominant *episteme* and practices that were mainly geared to the defense of the privileged few and the gradual destruction of all the creative powers and potentialities of the poor. The worldwide assault of modern economy against the remaining subsistence economies has indeed considerably weakened the people's traditional means of defense. We have amply shown how all the various attempts to "integrate" the uprooted poor into the dominant markets by substituting formal economic relations for threatened subsistence practices are doomed to transform vernacular poverty into helpless misery. Poverty equipped with means of subsistence is what the human condition has been through history. Misery is poverty deprived of its traditional means of subsistence. Yet, we believe that such a dismal perspective could only become reality if we yield to panic. However, there is indeed a real

²⁵ World-wide, the costs of publicity are estimated at \$450 billion annually, see Majid Rahnema, Jean Robert, *La Puissance des pauvres*, Arles: Actes Sud., p. 19.

²⁶ See Majid Rahnema, Jean Robert, *La Puissance des pauvres*, Arles: Actes Sud, 2008.

danger that the strategies of all the governments serving the market could finally succeed in breaking the power of resistance of the poor.

We have written this essay sustained by the hope that the “crisis” could stimulate, instead of panic and fear, reflections on how to reinvent the present through new political options at the individual and social levels. For the Chinese, the idea of a “crisis” is rendered by the juxtaposition of the ideograms for “danger” and for “opportunity.” In ancient Greek, the word *krisis* means discernment, decision. If the “crisis” is understood in this sense, every time the economic system proceeds to the structural readjustments through which it attempts to nominally save its face,²⁷ it may lead to the understanding that unfathomable new powers can grow on the corpse of people’s freedom to subsist and govern themselves²⁸ and that not succumbing to them is a primordial ethical and political issue. If we yield to these powers, the mechanics of the world economic machine will foist a great *crisis* in order to compel people to accept the new disparities, inequities, expropriations, production detours and concomitant destruction of subsistence capacities deemed necessary to put it on its tracks again. Then the *crisis* will be another word for the stunning of the political imagination.²⁹

The cold and often fallacious “objectivity” of numbers conceals what neither the United Nations nor the World Bank and their likes have words to express: before the Development adventure that, for more than six decades, colonized the peoples of the South to the North’s economic mind-frame,³⁰ the majority of the poor still possessed *subsistence knowledges* that

²⁷ According to Milton Friedman, if you want to promote a change in the capitalist system, provoke a *crisis*. According to Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-System Analysis: An Introduction*, Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2004, the actions of anti-systemic groups contribute most of the time to reinforce the system.

²⁸ See Majid Rahnema, Jean Robert, op. cit., chapter IX, entitled “Changer de revolution,” a title that could be better translated in English by “For a change in the concept of revolution.”

²⁹ See Ivan Illich, *Energy and Equity*, op. cit., p. 23-26.

³⁰ See Majid Rahnema’s insider critique of Development in Majid Rahnema, Jean Robert, *La Puissance des pauvres*, op. cit., chapter VI : “The Development Imposture” (interview with Jean Robert).

allowed them to avoid falling into the dependencies that pave the way to destitution and misery. Since then, the capitalist persecution of subsistence has turned into an *epistemic war*, the war of economic know-how against subsistence knowledges.³¹

Political thought on modern economy must finally confront the question that it eludes for over two centuries: What should be the rightful place of economics in a truly democratic society? In other words, what is the place that historically and culturally constituted societies could provide to a domain that is bound to be ruled by the iron law of scarcity? To what extent should free human beings, aware of their freedom and their true “living riches,” allow a market economy to contaminate and pollute still more the interpersonal and non-economic relations and ties that constitute the real and ultimate wealth of a truly free society? And finally, how to prevent that the utilitarian logic³² of an economy mainly geared to growth and productivity gradually produces a *dissociated society*, that is transforms society into a “*dissociety*”, as the French sociologist Jacques Généreux’s has named it³³? Reflecting on the place of the economy within society would lead to a re-evaluation, not only of subsistence practices among non-European peoples or in the European past, but also could conceive of the *livelihood of man* as a synergy of subsistence and formal economy.³⁴

³¹ For an analysis of this epistemic war, see Majid Rahnema, Jean Robert, op. cit., chapter III: “The Poor’s Epistemè: Epistemology of the War Against Subsistence,” and IV: “The Constitution of an Epistemic Domination that Subjugates Traditional Subsistence Knowledges.”

³² See the works of the M.A.U.S.S. (movement anti-utilitariste en sciences sociales), its journal, *La Revue du MAUSS*, published by La Découverte, and the popularization of the movement’s ideas in the books of, for instance, Serge Latouche: *La Méga-machine. Raison technoscientifique, raison économique et progress*. Paris: La Découverte, 2004 [1994]; *Petit Traité de la décroissance sereine*, Paris : Mille et Une Nuits/Fayard, 2007.

³³ *La Dissociété*, Paris: Seuil, 2006.

³⁴For us, the classical initiation to the strangeness of modern economic normality is Karl Polanyi’s *The Great Transformation*, op. cit. By a self-affirmed disciple of Polanyi, see Louis Dumont, *From Mandeville to Marx: Genesis and Triumph of Economic Ideology*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977. Among the contemporary authors who have contributed to maintain alive the tradition that, since Aristotle, states that the administration of one’s own house (meaning all the activities covered by the Greek verbs *oikonoméô* and *oikodoméô*) is radically different from all *chrematistics*, defined by Aristotle as the disproportional mind-frame of the one who practices exchanges in order to obtain more than what he is ready to give, and to accumulate goods or money beyond all sound principle of satisfaction and satiety, we especially recommend: Alexandr Chayanov, *The Theory of Peasant*

Among all “third world” leaders that fought colonialism after World War Two, Gandhi is indeed one of the very few who understood that its destructive power was not primarily England’s conquering thrust, but the Indian adoption of the English beliefs that machines could indefinitely substitute for people’s work, that imported tweed was better than *khadi*, the Indian homespun fabric, and that the British School system was better than the Gandhian *Nai Taleem* project of indigenous schools.³⁵ If other Third World leaders had understood that what crushes the poor is what makes them useless, the decolonized South would have taken another course and the North could have learnt from its political experiences as it starts now to learn from the Zapatistas.³⁶

In the possibility of this contention and inversion we place our hopes.

Majid Rahnema has been diplomat and minister of the Iranian Government and functionary of UNDP, the United Nations Development Program. His critique of the Development adventure, based on firsthand experiences by an insider, is more radical than most criticism by outsiders. Rahnema is the author of several books in Persian, English and French, particularly: *The Post-Development Reader* (with Victoria Bawtree), London: Zed Books, 1997; *Le Nord perdu* (co-authored by Gustavo Esteva and Gilbert Rist), Lausanne: Éditions d’en bas, 1992; *Quand la Misère chasse la pauvreté*, Paris, Arles: Fayard/Actes Sud, 2003.

Economy, Homewood, Richard D. Irwin, for the American Economic Association, 1966. Chayanov was executed in 1937 for his “revisionist” opposition to the very economicist *kolkhose* promoted by the Soviet economists favoring State capitalism in the guise of socialism. In 1987, Chayanov was rehabilitated in Moscow, in a ceremony presided by Prof. Teodor Shanin, who declared that by assassinating Chayanov, Soviet socialism had committed suicide. See also Teodor Shanin’s site in the Internet. Julius Herman Boeke, *Economics and economic Policies of Dual Societies as Exemplified by Indonesia*, New York: Institute of Pacific Relations, 1953. François Partant, *La Fin du développement: naissance d’une alternative*, Paris: La Découverte, 1982.

³⁵ See our reflection on the actuality of Gandhi in Majid Rahnema, Jean Robert, op. cit., chapter V.

³⁶ See Majid Rahnema, Jean Robert, op. cit., Annex 1 to chapter IX, p. 237 ff.

Jean Robert is a historian of technology and a car resister involved in Amsterdam's Provo movement in 1963 and 1964. As a pedestrian whose liberty of movement is encroached upon by automobiles, he defines himself as a "toreador torreado."³⁷ Robert's publications include *Water is a Commons*, Mexico: Habitat International Coalition, 1994, *La Trahison de l'Opulence* (co-authored by Jean-Pierre Dupuy), Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1976, *Le Temps qu'on nous vole. Contre la société chronophage*, Paris : Seuil, 1980.

³⁷ See Emil Zapotek, "Confesiones de un torreador torreado" on Google. See also Ivan Illich and Jean Robert, "Autostop", in Corinne Kumar, ed., *Asking We Walk: The South as New Political Imaginary*, Bangalore: Streelekha Publications, vol. I, 2007, p. 352-356.