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Declaration on Soil

A joint statement, drafted in Hebenshausen, Germany, December 6, 1990, in collaboration with Sigmar Groeneveld, Lee Hoinacki and other friends.

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Ivan Illich
DECLARATION ON SOIL

The ecological discourse about planet earth, global hunger, threats to life, urges us to look down at the soil, humbly, as philosophers. We stand on soil, not on earth. From soil we come, and to the soil we bequeath our excrements and remains. And soil - its cultivation and our bondage to it - is remarkably absent from those things clarified by philosophy in our western tradition.

As philosophers, we search below our feet because our generation has lost its grounding in both soil and virtue. By virtue, we mean that shape, order and direction of action informed by tradition, bounded by place, and qualified by choices made within the habitual reach of the actor; we mean practice mutually recognized as being good within a shared local culture that enhances the memories of a place.

We note that such virtue is traditionally found in labor, craft, dwelling and suffering supported, not by an abstract earth, environment or energy system, but by the particular soil these very actions have enriched with their traces. Yet, in spite of this ultimate bond between soil and being, soil and the good, philosophy has not brought forth the concepts that would allow us to relate virtue to common soil, something vastly different from managing behavior on a shared planet.

We were torn from the bonds to soil - the connections that limited action, making practical virtue possible - when modernization insulated us from plain dirt, from toil, flesh, soil and grave. The economy into which we have been absorbed - some, willy-nilly, some at great cost - transforms people into interchangeable morsels of population, ruled by the laws of scarcity.

Commons and homes are barely imaginable to persons hooked on public utilities and garaged in furnished cubicles. Bread is a mere foodstuff, if not calories or roughage. To speak of friendship, religion and joint suffering as a style of conviviality - after the soil has been poisoned and cemented over - appears like academic dreaming to people randomly scattered in vehicles, offices, prisons and hotels.

As philosophers, we emphasize the duty to speak about soil. For Plato, Aristotle and Galen it could be taken for granted; not so today. Soil on which culture can grow and corn be cultivated is lost from view when it is defined as a complex subsystem, sector, resource, problem or "farm" - as agricultural science tends to do.

As philosophers, we offer resistance to those ecological experts who preach respect for science, but foster neglect for historical tradition, local flair and the earthy virtue, self-limitation.

Sadly, but without nostalgia, we acknowledge the pastness of the past. With diffidence, then, we attempt to share what we see: some results of the earth's having lost its soil. And we are irked by the neglect for soil in the discourse carried on among boardroom ecologists. But we are also critical of many among well-meaning romantics, Luddites and mystics who exalt soil, making it the matrix, not of virtue, but of life. Therefore, we issue a call for a philosophy of soil: a clear, disciplined analysis of that experience and memory of soil without which neither virtue nor some new kind of subsistence can be.

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