“The Separation of Shit and State”
Water Sovereignty and the New Commons
in Cuernavaca, Mexico

by

Jessica French Smith
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PREFACE

Ordinary men and women are learning from each other how to challenge the very nature and foundations of modern power, both its intellectual underpinnings and its apparatus. Explicitly liberating themselves from the dominant ideologies, fully immersed in their local struggles, these movements and initiatives reveal the diverse content and scope of grassroots endeavors.

Gustavo Esteva and Madhu Prakash—“Mas allá de desarrollo, ¿Como?”

Upon arriving in Mexico in March of 2008, the last leg of a five-country, yearlong study-abroad program, I was unexpectedly immersed in the rapidly expanding world of ecological sanitation, which is still largely unrecognized in the United States. Gustavo Esteva, a former corporate executive and government planner and now a grassroots activist and self-described “deprofessionalized intellectual,” was our program coordinator in Mexico. He introduced me to a man named César Añorve whose work would forever change my perception of the appropriate uses and management of that precious gift of the sky, water, and more specifically of the state and corporate controlled water grid and the flush toilet, the symbol par excellence of modernity.

César is an architect, a political cartoonist, an appropriate technology innovator, and now a good friend. I lived with him and his family in the spring of 2008 and winter of 2009, learning to build dry composting toilets, cisterns to harvest rainwater, and systems to filter grey water. His designs are reflective of his profound respect for the natural world and are easily reproducible; an important part of his
work is to teach how to build these designs, the construction of which has become a source of income for many. He brings people together throughout Mexico and Latin America in small community-based workshops in which participants learn the technology and learn that anyone with a hammer and some cement can start a sanitation insurrection in their own backyard. As water today becomes increasingly “scarce” (read: privatized and industrially exploited), users of these technologies, with a little bit of leg work and a lot of help from their friends, can bring the care of their water supply back into their own hands and begin to regenerate “the commons.”

Through my time spent in Mexico, I would come to understand “the commons” and “community” not as tragedies or casualties of the modern era, but as something men and women the world over are working to regenerate. When Gustavo speaks of the “New Commons” he refers to the spaces common men and women are creating to disengage from the economic logic of the market, to re-embed learning in culture, to nourish their own lands again, and to recover their own definition of needs (Esteva 1992). While I was staying with César, new faces came through everyday seeking guidance and inspiration, starting this project or that. And for me, the most compelling aspect of César’s work was his commitment to word of mouth, small-scale production, freely shared information, and the autonomy that comes from not being dependent upon unwieldy institutions for the most basic human necessity, water.

Through his work, César is providing the tools for what I call water sovereignty. “In discussing the politics of shit,” as Gustavo said, addressing a symposium of friends of Ivan Illich, “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 canceling out very dirty shitwork, but also to disconnect your stomach from any public or private centralized bureaucracy” (Esteva 1998). In the development era the cumbersome and wasteful bureaucracy to which he refers, whether state or corporate run, has increasingly been shaped by neoliberal ideology, profoundly impacting the common person’s quotidian reality. Water sovereignty describes the autonomy and dignity of being responsible for your own resource management, so contrary to the top-down approach of most development programs. As Gustavo writes based on his own experience, “Even the best development programs, like those I was conceiving and implementing, were totally counterproductive: damaging to their supposed beneficiaries” (Esteva 1998).

Through my focus on the work of César, I have chosen to engage the ideas and work of a particular group of authors and friends that emerged from and continue to shape a well-grounded intellectual tradition of questioning the nature and foundations of modern power. Gustavo encouraged me to read Ivan Illich, who I would later discover was a close friend both of Gustavo’s and César’s. They are part of a collective that grew around, ultimately superseded, but continues to be grounded in Illich’s work in Mexico. These are the people I have learned with and from most closely, and in this thesis I have chosen to primarily engage their work and that of those who have informed their work. I deliberately chose not to write an account of the development age in Mexico or of social movements in the new millennium, but rather to look at César’s work and to position myself within it in light of my personal experiences in Mexico in 2008-09. My intention in writing the thesis in this way has
been to trouble a bit the prevailing development discourse by providing a small
window into life at the Añorve home as I experienced it and hopefully to invite
dialogue as we all continue to learn from each other. Ultimately, this is but a chapter
in the story of my continuous quest for understanding.
As we packed up our bags Gustavo Esteva announced tomorrow’s theme: “The Separation of Shit and State”. It was the end of a long day of foundation lectures in Mexico City. I had been sitting for six hours on the tiled, teal-colored living room floor in a two-story house in Colonia Santo Domingo. The space was graciously converted to a temporary classroom by one of the host-mothers for our study abroad group. Gustavo described the next day’s activities for us: We would be traveling by bus an hour south of D.F. (for Distrito Federal, which is a colloquial way to refer to Mexico City) to the home of a man called César Añorve.

The converted school bus could not make the dusty mountain climb to César’s place. A pack of twenty-seven gringos, all but two from the U.S., descended from it in the middle of the main road in Ocotepec, Cuernavaca. We walked past the corner farmacia, trying not to roll our ankles on the stones jutting from the dirt road. We were certainly a spectacle. The stares of passersby reminded me that most of us hadn’t showered for days and that I was wearing one of the three t-shirts and the only pair of jeans I had left the states with six months ago. Before I landed in Mexico, I had been traveling in four other countries while studying on the year-long International Honors Program: Rethinking Globalization. Mexico was the last stop on our itinerary after Washington D.C., Tanzania, India, and New Zealand (in that
order). In Mexico City, I had settled in my home stay in Santo Domingo, a neighborhood established in the 1970s through a land invasion.

Sweaty from the ascent, we filed into a front patio through a gate. “What belongs to the soil… to the soil. What belongs to the earth... to the earth,” proclaimed a poster board propped up against a plastic chair. This is the place where we would have our next lecture, in a yard between what is presumably a main house and a smaller guesthouse, under a tarp to protect us from the strength of the sun. My fair skin was grateful. I looked around; there was a striking amount of green in my field of vision, considering we were in the dry season.

César Añorve, a short man, slight of frame, probably in his late 40s, walked out of the smaller house with what looked like a toilet in his hands. But it couldn’t be the heavy porcelain of the throne I’m used to; he wouldn’t be able to carry it with such ease. I later learned that its lightweight is attributable to the fiberglass material of which it was made. This toilet was one of Mr. Añorve’s own designs, which he called the *sanitorio ecológico seco*, meaning literally the “dry ecological toilet,” but more commonly referred to in English as a dry composting toilet. The object had piqued my interest: How can it work without water? But most importantly, what does this soft-spoken man with a portable toilet have to do with the separation of shit and state?
I was eager for an explanation, but what came next did not meet my expectations. César began to speak, with Mojdeh, who was traveling with us, translating for the non-Spanish speakers in the group. Mojdeh was a close friend of Gustavo’s, an Iranian ex-pat who was directed to Mexico by activist acquaintances in the U.S. That was 15 years ago. César started by telling a story. He was making fun of himself, of how small and weak he is and has always been. He and Mojdeh jested in Spanish, a few witty turns of phrase that were not easily translatable. Looking at them, the students chuckled. He began and Mojdeh translated, speaking in the first person for him. He recalled being in elementary school and asked us if we remembered those height and weight charts. Many of us did. He joked that this was one test he could always count on failing. Little César never lived up to board of education expectations. But he had a thought: “If I were to be exactly the measurements the state says I should be, I would cease to be César.” Mojdeh continued translating for him, “And that was when I understood development.” Pause. “Development is the extermination of the other.” Not such a light story anymore.

I was expecting a technical explanation of the toilets, even an environmentalist diatribe on the reasons we have to better conserve water. Rather, in seven words, César had captured an incredibly poignant critique of the development paradigm. This is something César continuously does well, establishing connections in a concise and potent manner between concrete practices, such as his dry toilets, and unwieldy ideas like development. The “development” of “under-developed” nations has become the global mantra of the past 60 years. Development in theory and practice “exterminates” diversity by reducing it to a point on the unilineal path of
“progress” achieved through economic growth, amongst a variety of other universal yardsticks, used to “measure” both individuals and nations. In this ethnocentric process Euro-America is constructed as the “self” against which the formerly colonized world is defined, becoming development’s “other”.

The birth of the so-called development era is associated with the 1944 Bretton Woods conference in New Hampshire, where representatives from forty-four allied nations gathered to reconstruct the post-World War II economy. At this meeting, the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) were signed into being. These supranational institutions, with the World Trade Organization having replaced GATT and the IBRD now a part of the World Bank, are the three key players in the ongoing construction of a world order that divides the countries of the globe into a “developed” world and an “under-developed” world.

Development critic Arturo Escobar (1995) explains that this view of the current world order has infused the way nations see themselves, the process of formation of their identity as modern nations. After World War II, the term “Third World” was coined to refer to the nations non-aligned with either the capitalist (“First World”) or communist (“Second World”) blocs. In common usage today the category has become synonymous with “underdeveloped”, “developing nations” and/or the “Global South”. “Development,” writes Escobar, “has been the primary mechanism
through which the Third World has been imagined and imagines itself, thus
marginalizing or precluding other ways of seeing and doing” (Escobar 1995).

Sixty years after Bretton Woods, the notion of development permeates the
political, economic, and social spheres in “developed” and “developing” nations
alike. “Development constructs the contemporary Third World, silently, without our
noticing it” (Escobar 1995). Escobar’s choice to describe this as a “silent” process of
construction speaks to the pervasive nature of development discourse. The categories
of “developed” and “underdeveloped” and the process of “developing” are
understood as the prevailing global reality instead of a particular theoretical lens that
reflects the cultural, economic and social values of those who, through theory and
practice, crafted this lens. These standards are then assumed to hold universal
validity.

César’s analogy between the state- and school-mandated process of measuring
children’s development and the Bretton Woods development paradigm becomes
clearer: What is left out of the discourse is that the little César who did not match the
height and weight charts, who he was before “developing”, would be gone. The
project of development not only shapes national policy but also seeks to shape
individual attitudes and aspirations, through the cultivation of particular desires and
the push to become economically productive subjects. The César before is implicitly
constructed as “less than”, undervalued, undesirable. In not living up to the
expectations of the school and the state he is deviating from the norm. He has “failed”
to “develop”.
The loss of little César in the process of development becomes an “externality”; just as the environmental and social devastation of development are “externalities”. In economic theory “externalities” are external costs or benefits unaccounted for in the original transaction. For example, if a factory causes air pollution, the neighboring community ultimately bears the cost, but the factory continues to profit. Pollution becomes an “externality”, an unaccounted for external cost. J.L. Sadie writes, “Economic development of an underdeveloped peoples by themselves is not compatible with the maintenance of their traditional customs and mores. A break with the latter is a prerequisite to economic progress” (1960, 302).

The loss of the “traditional” self and the resulting social disintegration is an externality, an external price to be paid for the benefits of “development”, via insertion into market relations. “Tradition” and “backwardness” are posited as development’s other, its greatest hindrances on the march toward progress.

In recent decades a strong critique of the development paradigm and industrial society in general has emerged in Mexico amongst a well established group of activist intellectuals whose ideas and work, like the roots system of a mature tree, well-grounded, prominent, yet just below my field of vision, I stumbled upon through a string of chance events and connections at César’s working compound in Cuernavaca. It would radically change my understanding of water politics and global hierarchies, and of my own relation to the natural world. It planted in me the seed of hope and a profound appreciation for the art of daily living began to take root.
At one point, César showed us one of his “popostales,” postcards created by him that convey his criticism of the conventional modern water sewage system. “Popostal” is a play on words—*popo*, slang for poop, and *postal*, or postcard. He refers to the toilet drawing on the one he showed us as the “Exterminator Angel,” a white ceramic being that mixes water, shit, and urine and takes them far away. This definitely got a rise out of the group, as some students eyelids had been drooping in the thickness of the afternoon. According to César’s estimation, the average person flushes in one year what s/he would able to drink in forty years. César uses his critique of the water-based toilet system to make a political point: The modern sewer system takes one of our most precious and finite resources, fresh water, and mixes it with excrement, pours the mix back out into our water ways, polluting them, or separates them in massive sewage treatment plants that drain energy and use excessive amounts of chemicals. César’s toilet design is his way of acting against our unnecessarily polluting systems of waste disposal. “When we avoid using water to transport excrement,” he explained to the group, “this is a radical action which can contribute to returning the sacred character that water may have had before the era of sewage systems.”
In César’s design of the dry composting toilet, the bowl has a separator to catch the urine and divert it to a container outside of the bathroom. The urine is then diluted with water and makes an incredibly nitrogen-rich fertilizer, safe to use on small farms. The bowl is located in a bathroom with two chambers below the floor (but still above ground level), each with its own opening. When one is full, you simply move the seat over to the second chamber and cover the opening to the first while the contents decompose. The chambers must be kept dry (this is why the urine is diverted outside) and for this purpose have a black ventilation pipe, which heats in the sun, causing the gases to rise with the hot air.
The dry composting toilet, requires no water and it turns the “waste” into soil and nutrient-rich fertilizer. Because there is no water involved, users of this technology do not “need” the state or private corporations to provide the costly water lines to fill their toilet tanks or a complicated and water-wasting sewage system to take the soiled water away.

Much of the dominant discourse emphasizing privatization and decentralization of water management in Mexico has been shaped by a “politics of needs.” The “Basic Needs Approach” in development was born in 1976 at The Conference on Employment, Income Distribution and Social Progress, organized by the ILO (International Labor Organization). The approach “aimed at the achievement of a certain specific minimum standard of living before the end of the century” (ILO in Esteva 1992, 15). Since then, this approach has been widely promoted by the World Bank (Esteva 1992, 15). It is a policy based on a “benevolent” relationship in which those with political and economic power identify and work to better meet the
needs of those without. That is to say, the “need” for water lines and sewer systems is constructed and depoliticized by developers and state governments alike. This positions the people as “clients” in relation to the state, upon which the public relies and which may in turn sell this “responsibility” to private corporations to provide for “basic needs” (Escobar 1995, 224). There is no denying that water is a basic human need, but the way this need is constructed as a problem to be solved by large institutions begs questioning.

The concept of “needs” is pervasive throughout the development discourse, and the satisfaction of Basic Human Needs is thought of as the key to ending “poverty”. Poverty is defined by the “underconsumption” of “needed” goods and services. These “needs” are different than the “necessities” of millennia gone by, and are rather decided upon by development experts who then purport to meet them (Illich 1992). By the Second Development Decade, “true development” was no longer solely about economic growth but included social growth as well. As Ivan Illich writes, “until people change and recognize their needs they cannot contribute to the growth of productive force” (1992, 95). He writes this to point out that the project of “experts” constructing needs as imagined from above was a necessary element in constructing the idea of poverty, and the motivation for people to behave as economic actors in order to satisfy these needs.

The concept of needs divided humanity into those who are more or less human according to the level of satisfaction of these constructed needs. In systems theory today, Illich writes, “the needs discourse becomes the pre-eminent device for reducing people to individual units with input requirements” (1992, 98). In this view,
the process of needs interpretation becomes the exclusive property of specialists and the means of satisfying ‘needs’ positions people as clients in relation to the state (Escobar 1995, 224). This type of thinking “prescribes a politics more concerned with the provision of professionally defined requirements (needs) for survival, than with personal claims to freedom which would foster autonomous coping” (Illich 1992, 99).

There is a long history of communal labor and resource management in Mexico. The practice of communal land holding predates the conquest. However, this practice was forcefully replaced by the encomienda system in many areas. Promised in the 1917 revolution, but not actualized until Cardenas presidency, the ejido system was legally recognized and reinstated in 1934. In this system, land cannot be bought and sold, only inherited. Often water resources are managed by local asambleas, who appoint community members to cargos; specific duties they need to perform to care for community resources. As there is no private property, everything to an extent constitutes “the commons”. Privatization therefore is an affront to the cultural fabric of ejidal society.

The water “crisis” in Mexico is often used to justify the state attempts to transition to privatization. However, I would argue this “crisis” has been constructed and perpetuated by the state and developers, those whom are now promoting privatization. Currently, Agriculture accounts for 78 percent of Mexico’s water usage, whereas domestic consumption accounts for only 17 percent (Food and Agriculture
According to Mexico’s own National Institute of Ecology, 100 of the 188 major aquifers in the country are overexploited due to heavily subsidized groundwater pumping for irrigation of agricultural lands, which has had devastating impacts on those who depend on this groundwater for their daily survival. Only the very wealthiest of farmers and landholders, who have electric pumps and mechanized irrigation systems, benefit from the yearly 670 million USD in subsidies. The Institute estimates only the top decile of wealthy farmers receives 53% of the subsidy (Piña et al. 2007).

This state of affairs is the result of what many call the “Green Revolution” of industrial agriculture in Mexico, beginning in the 1950s. The “Green Revolution” refers to an amalgamation of development schemes meant to modernize agriculture to produce higher yields. This includes state subsidies that support increased mechanization (including irrigation), transgenic monocultures, and the use of petro-chemical fertilizers. The amount of water necessary to sustain this type of modern agriculture is substantially higher than in traditional farming. In other words, this is a self-generated water crisis: Regular Mexicans are suffering from an overexploitation of water wells by the few in the name of national economic growth. It becomes axiomatic, then, that it is the developers who decide the path human beings’ and societies’ will take toward development such as in Mexico, dictate the necessity to create systems that allow higher agricultural outputs, and then move headlong down that path at the expense of those they purport to serve.

During the early 1990s, after the effects of the Green Revolution were being felt, water management in Mexico shifted from a largely state-run operation to a
decentralized, privatized management system. This was part of a larger decentralizing and privatizing process that also restructured the education and health care sectors. Asad et al. describe the water management reform in Mexico, as part of a regional trend, in this way: “The decentralization process implemented in Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America has been presented by international funding organizations, national governments, and other proponents as a key component of a successful water reform strategy. It is argued that decentralization allows for a more efficient provision of service by local authorities, private companies, and water users, and for a more efficient and equitable allocation and use of the resource as well” (Asad et al. 1999).

In order to pave the way for NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement (or TLC, Trato de Libre Comercio, its ironic Spanish acronym), the Salinas administration introduced major reforms in 1992. In the area of water management, they included the elimination of federal subsidies for water, the incorporation of market driven regulatory policies and the resulting commodification of water, and the establishment of a “full-cost recovery” system in the process of privatization (Whiteford and Melville 2001). The water management decentralization process was two-fold. In rural areas the management of irrigation water was transferred from the state to users in local river basin councils, and in urban areas water distribution was largely privatized. Maragaret Wilder assesses the impact of this program in rural areas: “The government discontinued its policy of heavily subsidizing water just as it implemented decentralized management,” Wilder writes, “thereby leaving cash-starved local water managers with few resources to deal with
often inefficient water delivery systems” (2003). Faced with these difficulties many local water managers have turned to the private sector.

In the late 90s, the federal government launched several new water management programs, most likely in an attempt to soften the blow of decentralization. The “Efficient Use of Water and Energy Program” was executed under the Comisión Nacional de Agua (CNA or CONAGUA). In this program the federal government subsidized 50 percent of the cost of updating water infrastructure and of rehabilitating wells. Between 1997 and 2002 the government invested 100 million USD in this program and 8,150 wells were rehabilitated (World Water Council 2006). This may partially account for the World Health Organization’s finding that access to drinking water in that period had improved 7 percent (World Health Organization 2008).

The National Water Plan 2001-2006 was established by the National Development Plan. Under this plan PROMAGUA and PRODDER were both founded in 2001 as a part of CONAGUA. PROMAGUA, the Program for the Modernization of Water Utilities, works toward “financing and capacity building for local water authorities.” Under this program it is required that participating authorities make legal and structural adjustments for private participation in their local water distribution systems (World Water Council 2006). PRODDER, the Program for the Devolution of Water Rights, intended to transfer water authority from central to local government, takes water tax revenues and reinvests them at a local level in the management systems of both private and municipal providers as long as the providers match the contribution (World Water Council 2006). In other words, both programs pave the
way for privatization; the first by requiring local authorities to remove protections against privatization and the second by funneling tax dollars to private providers.

The reforms in water policy, as described above increasingly reinforce users dependency on the state and private corporations, even in the process of decentralization. The also undermine the existing ejidal structure. In the dominant discourse, the distribution and management of water in Mexico is seen as nonpolitical, which it is anything but. César is contesting this “client” relationship of dependency on the state, taking water management out of the hands of “experts” and creating the space for people to control their own water systems. The Separation of Shit and State.

In contrast to the privatization and decentralization model, César situates his designs within the “appropriate technology” movement. This global movement cannot be pinned to one geographic area, though the birth of the term is generally pinned to the 1970s environmental movement. While appropriate technology is often associated with “developing” countries, there are many practitioners in industrialized nations as well. The movement is grounded in a few simple principles: The technology should use locally available resources, be easily reproducible, be labor intensive (as opposed to capital intensive), and be intended to lessen negative impacts on the environment and society.
All of the appropriate technologies César designs are linked. César proposes starting with something “small, simple, and humble,” like rainwater collection and filtration, for which he has designed a rainwater catchment system that anyone can build. He also has designed grey water filtration systems using specific plants, like cattails and papyrus, to “eat” the soap from the water. Listening to him speak about his work, suddenly the lush gardens on the patio take on a new meaning. I notice for the first time a small pipe jutting from what is presumably the bathroom in the smaller house, carrying soapy shower water into the “garden,” which is actually a two-tiered built wetland for grey water filtration.

What needs to be emphasized here is that, in the post-1990 Mexican reforms, decentralization and privatization are part and parcel of the same process. While decentralization may appear to “empower” local users, it does not have the intended effect, but rather smoothes the path toward privatization. In the Mexican government’s rhetoric privatization is presented as the new, decentralized management scheme. But others criticize this notion, arguing “that it is really a form of re-centralizing authority and control over water subject to the demands of national markets and global economies rather than those of local households and citizens”
(Johnston 2003). In contrast, appropriate technology facilitates just that, local control over water.

It is clear that in Mexico privatization has become a legitimized way for the state to shirk its burden of water management under the banner of greater accountability, which is supposedly achieved through decentralization. As Wilder and Lankao (2006) put it, “Decentralization and privatization appear to be not so much instruments aimed at improving efficiency as they do channels for preferred treatment for capital accumulation by private entities… and [for] the transfer of control of land and water assets from the ejidal (or social) sector to the private sector.” The ejido system is the very backbone of indigenous communities in Mexico. The process of privatization is not only a shift toward capitalism; it is a threat to a way of life. In César’s vision of water technology he is providing an alternative and many of his designs are being reproduced in communities threatened by privatization and exploited by industrial water users.

It gradually becomes evident that the work César is doing constitutes a radical re-imagining of reality, a reality that has increasingly shaped through the process of the commodification of water. Through his work he is re-defining what basic human needs are and how they should be met. It is a re-imagining, in other words, of the practice of everyday living. Escobar (1995) notices that it is at this level of everyday living where we are seeing the most significant proposals for change in the region. It is indeed his desire to redefine the practices of daily life that drives César to reconstruct the world around him, impacting the lives of many others who have learned with and from him. It is in the simple act of fetching water or going to the
bathroom that his technologies prompt their users to rethink their relationship to the state.

In the project of separating shit and state César is reclaiming control of a crucial resource, water, and turning what is usually treated as waste into nutrient rich fertilizer. His technologies upset the model of clientelaje, clientelism, which has shaped for so many years access to vital resources for rural and indigenous peoples in Mexico, helping users to disengage from the state- and/or corporate-controlled grid. From pumping the day’s drinking water from a community-built large underground cistern, to bringing the urine container to a farmer down the street to trade fertilizer for vegetables, these social actors are producing meaning both as a reaction against and in dialogue with the dominant water politics, in the hope of producing something entirely different from the water politics that shape normative discourses. One of his cartoons captures this change well. It states “Si eres de los que creen que el agua es mercancía, entonces... jala y olvida” or “If you are one who believes water is... pull and forget.”
merchandise… flush and forget”. In the caption he estimates if you were to fill you toilet tank with one liter bottles it would cost you approximately 224,000 pesos. At about $1.50 a liter in the U.S., it would cost 48,000 USD, approximately a year of tuition at Wesleyan. The message is clear: the flush toilet is extremely wasteful, especially in the context of increasing commodification of water. Through these seemingly mundane technologies César is encouraging a new politicized stance with regard to water usage.

That first afternoon in Cuernavaca, César told us he sees the plastic bottle as an affront to our humanity: It takes “the gift of the sky and makes it merchandise.” In his childhood, being able to drink water from the ground was a “life-shaping event,” he could walk into any neighbors house and ask for a glass of water, he and his friends could swim in the gorge without fear of getting sick. “Having your own drinking water is very different from the monetized interaction of buying water,” he said. And it is precisely our relationship with water as a natural resource that César intends to affect through his work; water should not be a commodity but something everyone should have access to through care and labor. By means of appropriate water technologies, he seeks, by extension, to reform our relationship with the natural world, to definitively place it outside of the influences of the state, capitalism, development, and privatization.

Because it is in the nature of development to colonize everyday thought and practice, it becomes difficult to imagine any other way of dealing with the water “crisis” than those solutions prescribed by developers, namely decentralization, privatization, large dam projects, expensive irrigation systems, massive sewage
treatment plants, and generally more “high” technology. I would argue that the crisis, which is no doubt a reality for many people, was itself historically constructed and is now being perpetuated by developers and the state.

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César then asked, “Do you want to look around?” “Is there enough time?” The first question was directed at the students, the second at the coordinators. We all moved in the thick mid-afternoon heat, the plastic chairs scraping the gravel as we shuffled out from under the tarp. As we walked past the main house, constructed from adobe, César told us he designed it. “I had the great misfortune of being trained as an architect,” he said, chuckling. “It took me years to unlearn what they taught me in the University”. The idea of “unlearning” his education stuck with me. I would later realize that César had used the term directly in reference to Illich’s *Deschooling Society*. Illich makes the distinction between “education” and “learning” very clear. He writes, “the right to learn is curtailed by the obligation to attend school” (Illich 1974). Education is something you consume in a classroom, whereas real learning is self-initiated.

As I passed the house the view brought a little bit of perspective: I could see the entire city of Cuernavaca from up there, as it has rapidly expanded in recent years, stretching through the valley, hundreds of small houses pushing the periphery and clawing up the mountainside. Behind the house was the taller, or workshop/studio, where the cement toilets are built, the fiberglass ones are built by his brother. His two
twenty-something year old sons and his nephew lowered their music (I think it was Led Zeppelin) for an awkward introduction. The wall-less roof was a recent addition to keep the sun off, César explained, which was much appreciated by the boys who spend their days working in the taller, music blasting as they mix cement and fill the four molds they have to complete orders for individuals, schools, and community centers throughout Mexico.

Nearby there was another house in the process of construction and next to it what appeared to be a round cement patio, maybe 15 feet in diameter, with a pump sticking out of it and a manhole cover near the pump. It looked just like a well to tap into ground water (impossible this high on the mountain), but it was actually the top of one of César’s rainwater cisterns. About a story deep, the massive, cement egg-shaped container is buried in the ground, and during the rainy season it collects water diverted from the roof of the house and stores it for the impending dry season. A little further down the slope there were rows and rows of cinderblock-shaped reddish brown bricks. They were adobes, made from the earth removed when they dug the cistern, and they were now baking in the sun. They would be used to complete the construction of the new house. This is how César integrates his appropriate technologies: The dirt excavated to dig a cistern produces enough adobes to build a modest sized home, which in turn will rely on another appropriate technology, since adobe structures have naturally heating and cooling properties.

During my stay in Mexico, water was my second highest expense after food. The other students and I would joke about how beer was less expensive than water. The reality wasn’t really that funny; it actually was cheaper to get drunk than stay
hydrated. The majority of household water where I resided was purchased from “pirate” distributors, large bombas on the backs of trucks, the words Agua Para Uso Humano usually hand painted on the side. The pirate distributors capitalized on the failure of most infrastructure projects and the overexploitation of groundwater resources. In Oaxaca City, there is no functioning sewage treatment plant for a population of a half million people.

As my traveling group got ready to leave César’s home, I lagged behind to ask César how I could learn more. I knew right away that something extraordinary was going on there, something that would be useful to me. “Many people from afuera, ‘from outside,’ César said vaguely, “have come and stayed here at the house and learned with me.” He added, “If you’re interested, I am here.”

It would be nearly a month before I returned, in April of 2008. In the interim, I traveled six hours south to Oaxaca City with my group, where we continued our studies at La Universidad de la Tierra, Unitierra for short. Unitierra wasn’t what we would typically call a University. Unitierra is a non-hierarchical institution, where learning is a cooperative effort, which means that anyone can propose a topic of study and use the space to learn with each other. In reference to his self-proclaimed title of “deprofessionalized intellectual”, Gustavo writes, “In Unitierra we are not producing professionals. We have created a convivial place, where we all are enjoying ourselves while learning together” (Esteva 1998). It also serves as an activism coordination
center, linking reflection and action in everyday life. Unitierra’s founding principles draw heavily on Ivan Illich’s *Deschooling Society* and *Tools for Conviviality*.

I came back on my own for a ten day visit in April 2008, while the other students were on vacation. I spent most of my time learning to build the cement version of the dry toilets in the outdoor workshop with his sons. One of my first nights at Cesar’s house we played *damas*, what I know as Chinese Checkers, with the family. He was quiet and calculating, in contrast to his wife Luisa, who was boisterous and fiercely competitive. Ximel, Atzin, and Dalia bantered as most siblings do. César won. Afterwards, he showed me some of his drawings in the smaller house; it doubled as a library. Flipping through binders of his quirky and poignant political cartoons he decided to show me letters from Ivan Illich – I remember him writing of how humble César was, how exceptional his work was, but that’s all. I didn’t know who Illich was at the time and so it did not make as much of an impression on me as it should have.

In January, 2009, I went back to Cuernavaca, this time by myself, to spend a month with César and his family. A few days after I arrived, we sat in his office, which isn’t really an office at all but an old home, the Mexican home of Ivan Illich, as it turned out, located just a few blocks down the mountain from the Añorve residence.

César said, “This is the table.” He was whittling a pea-sized wooden hand to replace a missing one on a small statue of St. John that used to belong to Illich. The ceiling was vaulted and nearly two stories high over a terracotta-colored tile floor.

I looked up from the boxy PC where I was translating flyers that would go above dry urinals explaining their ecological value and practical maintenance
(César’s design of course). The table he was referring to was about twelve feet in length, wide and sturdy, made of thick dark wood.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“The table where the dictionary began,” he said, giving a half smile and keeping his eyes on his whittling. Behind him, through a glass wall the bright blue and yellow tiles of the outdoor kitchen glinted in the afternoon light, warming the courtyard.

I then realized he was referring to the *The Development Dictionary*. For a second I remembered holding the thick book in my hands, keeping it holed away in my carrel in the library, and suddenly the reality of its inception by a group of real people, of de-professionalized thinkers and activists sitting around a wooden table in Cuernavaca came together for me in an incredible harmony of theory and practice. Realizing for me it is meaningless to merely write a critique of development without taking the concrete steps to create my own alternative.

I stepped out into the courtyard to breathe in what I had just learned. I walked a slow circle around the herb garden, finally pausing at a pond that had majestic papyrus plants jutting skyward. Everything there seemed to have a reason, a way of furthering a mode of living alternative to that proposed by development: The web of papyrus roots acts as a natural filter for any soap or grime in the water. The sound of the water as it
circulated through the pond soothed me, pulled me in. I could not help but gaze meditatively on the *formas pulsantes*, the clover shaped basins that oxidize the water as it passes through.

Wolfgang Sachs (1992), in his introduction to *The Development Dictionary*, writes:

“Over the years, all of us authors, in various contexts and associations have been involved in a continuous conversation, spending days or weeks together chatting, cooking, traveling, studying and celebrating… Slowly and sometimes inadvertently, a common frame of reference emerged and informed, in turn, our individual work. Deprofessionalized intellectuals, this is our experience, derive life from friendship and common commitment; otherwise how would nonacademic research be sustained? In our case this would not have been possible without the personal and intellectual magnetism of Ivan Illich, in particular, who brought a number of us together and animated our thinking throughout the years.”

Ivan Illich was an Austrian philosopher, born 1926. He is known for his critiques of contemporary Western culture. He served in the Catholic priesthood for a number of years before his political leanings began to cause conflict with the Vatican. He founded CIDOC, Center for Intercultural Documentation, in Cuernavaca in 1961, where many intellectuals would gather in convivial learning. Fearing its own institutionalization, the center was shut down in 1976. Illich continued to maintain his home in Cuernavaca and travel to the US and Germany. It is rumored he spoke as many as fifteen languages, and never sat in a chair, as he believed they made you less mobile. Everyone I have spoken to who knew him agrees he had a captivating
personality. He passed away in 2002, only a few short years before I would be sitting in the garden of his former home talking with César.

I ask César if he misses Illich. “I do,” he says. “It gets easier with time, but some days are harder than others.” Gustavo Esteva, Jean Robert (who also has a chapter in the Dictionary), Ivan Illich, and César were all good friends, “but Ivan was the leader,” César clarifies. “We were all disciples.”

I tell him he has his own disciples now. He ponders this for a moment but in his characteristically humble manner, dismisses it. “Gustavo and Jean, yes,” he says. “They have their own, but me, I’m just a disciple.”

I want to say, “What the hell! What am I?” But I don’t.

I settle for, “You can’t know it, but you have an impact on other people, like ripples in the water.”

Later, as I read the writings of Illich, I noticed that the parallels between his ideas and César’s work are unmistakable. The cohesion between theory and practice in César’s work is beyond anything I have ever experienced. I would go so far to say that through his work he is realizing the project to restructure post-industrial society Illich advocated through what he called the “tools for conviviality.” And where do I fit into the picture? Perhaps I am part of the next generation of disciples. Perhaps it is because Gustavo has successfully uprooted everything I ever thought I knew and I am looking for a few answers. At the least, I am here with César in my own exploration of convivial learning.
Illich published his book *Tools for Conviviality* in 1973, nine years after he moved to Cuernavaca and helped to set up CIDOC. In the book, Illich refers to the time when he was writing as the “epilogue to the industrial age” and sets out to lay the foundation for the structuring of “convivial society.” He defines “conviviality” as the “autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment; and this [is] in contrast with the conditioned response of persons to the demands made upon them by others, and by a man-made environment.” In sum, “conviviality” is the “opposite of industrial productivity” (1973, 11).

In Illich’s view hyperindustrial society is dominated by the demand for products, permeating all institutions including health and education, which have become nouns to be consumed as opposed to practices related to the active verbs “healing” and “learning.” In a convivial society, Illich explains, the most important resource is “personal energy under personal control” (1973, 12) as opposed to industrial energy produced through extraction (mining, oil etc). “Tools” in the current industrial state tend to “curtail or negate any person’s right to the creative use of his or her energy” (1973, 12). To prevent this neutralization of a person’s right to labor creatively, it is necessary, according to Illich, to establish “procedures to ensure that controls over the tools of society are established and governed by the political process rather than decisions by experts” (1973, 12).

Illich defines “tools” broadly. They are “not only simple hardware such as drills, pots, syringes, brooms, building elements, or motors, and not just large machines like cars or power stations” but also “productive institutions such as
factories that produce tangible commodities like corn flakes or electric current, and productive systems for intangible commodities such as those which produce ‘education,’ ‘health,’ ‘knowledge,’ or ‘decisions’” (1973, 20). In a convivial society individuals control access to and use of the tools, and this changes their relationship to work: “A convivial society,” Illich writes, “should be designed to allow all its members the most autonomous action by means of tools least controlled by others. People feel joy, as opposed to mere pleasure, to the extent that their activities are creative; while the growth of tools beyond a certain point increases regimentation, dependence, exploitation and impotence” (1973, 20).

One afternoon, walking up from Illich’s old home, César commented, “Ivan would often come up this way to pass the afternoon here on the patio with me. I think he was fond of what I do.” His work certainly embodies the principles that grounded Illich’s conception of work. César’s projects are designed to be built by the future users with materials and labor that they can access and control, whereas the institutional responses to the water “crisis” reflect the “growth of tools” that, in Illich’s view, lead to regimentation and dependence.

César explicitly crafts his designs to be easily produced by anyone with an interest in learning how. The construction of the toilets, cisterns and various filtration systems require little more than a few shovels, a trowel, and perhaps a wheel barrel. These are all hand tools, “those which adapt man’s metabolic energy to a specific task” (Illich 1973, 21); combined with the will to learn, these hand tools are easily accessible and lend themselves to the kind of “autonomous action” described by Illich. Independent actors may then use this knowledge to foster autonomy and
interdependent learning. The implementation of large dam projects and the construction and maintenance of sewage treatment plants reflect tools in the hands of overgrown institutions, over which users have no control and which are environmentally and socially destructive through their devastation of ecosystems, and displacement of communities. “Tools foster conviviality,” Illich explains, “to the extent to which they can be easily used, by anybody, as often or as seldom as desired, for the accomplishment of a purpose chosen by the user. The use of such tools by one person does not restrain another from using them equally. They do not require previous certification of the user. Their existence does not impose any obligation to use them. They allow the user to express his meaning in action” (1973, 22).

Back in César’s home that evening, we were sitting at the table after a more than satisfying meal of tortillas and bacalao, a dried salted cod dish typically eaten during the New Year, when I noticed the particular way the afternoon sun would filter through the kitchen, the light lasting the length of our daily siesta. I asked César if he took the sun’s path into consideration when designing a home.

“I take a lot of things into consideration,” he said, “for example, the people. Like the woman who came today, I get to know them, we talk about what they are looking for, how they live.”

“How do you start building?” I asked.

“With the cistern. We find a good location. And with the earth from the cistern we make the adobe.”

“It’s enough for an entire house?”
“Depends on the people. I don’t like to make big houses, just enough to *convivir,*” he said, clearly alluding to the sense of what a good life is that he shared with Illich, “but sometimes this is what people want, the big houses.”

Luisa chimed in from the porch, through the open kitchen window, “I don’t like big houses, it’s too much cleaning. You see how I spend all day caring for this place? Imagine something bigger.”

There is what I would refer to as a special “energy” when you step into César and Luisa’s home. It is as though you can feel the personal energy he put into creating it, his “meaning in action.” The dining room, the living room, and the more informal common area are all connected and separated from the kitchen only by a counter. It’s easy to talk across the living room into the kitchen or settle into a nook with someone for a long conversation. The windows are the right size and in the right place so there is always sunlight in the house, but it’s not too bright. The house is always cool during the day and toasty at night. Since my last visit the walls have been painted a startling new shade, the color a raspberry stains your fingers, but no one in the family will own up to whose idea it was to paint them that unusual color. I was looking around the house, thinking about César’s deliberateness in his house designs, when César resumed his answer to my question of how he builds a house:

“After we build the cistern, then we pick a place for the house that makes sense, where the rain can be directed from the roof to the cistern, and I think about the sun, too.” Illich notes that “science can also be used to simplify tools and to enable the layman to shape his immediate environment to his taste” (1973, 34), but “when over efficient tools are applied to facilitate man’s relations with the physical
environment, they can destroy the balance between man and nature” (1973, 51). This is what happened in the attempt to modernize the housing industry in Mexico, for which the government imposed standards that, while intending to improve safety, deprived many people of the opportunity to provide housing for themselves, as traditional dwellings, particularly those made with adobe, were not up to code.

The building industry, therefore, can contribute to destroying that balance and inhibit people’s ability to shape their immediate environment to their taste. In the building industry stringent codes must be met, codes the average self-builder, using non-industrial materials, cannot meet on his own. Illich writes, “The legal protection and financial support granted the industry reduces and cancels opportunities for the otherwise much more efficient self-builder” (1973, 39). Overnight, the “standard of living” set up as a goal in Mexico became unattainable for 80 percent of the people (Illich 1973, 39). The imposition of building industry standards in Mexico was tantamount, Illich argues, to “modernizing the poverty of [its] citizens” (1973, 39).

In César’s work, in contrast, each house is unique, its design dependent upon the person who will live in it and appropriate to the location. He works with the natural environment instead of against it. In this way he is able to build a home that is not dependent on outside energy for heating or cooling, where you can harvest enough water to live on, and that is sensitive to the individual and suitable to the environment. The process by which César designs and constructs homes is “expressing meaning in action” through the use of convivial tools.

“The transformation of learning into education paralyzes man’s poetic ability, his power to endow the world with his personal meaning” (Illich 1973, 60).
In relation to his discussion of the destructive power of nonconvivial tools, Illich also writes against compulsory education. Arguing that ‘education’ (the noun), instead of ‘learning’ (the verb) constructs knowledge as a consumer commodity. The more of it you consume, the higher your human capital is. In the face of ever increasing specialization and centralization in hyper-industrial society, there is a need for “highly programmed operators and clients” (Illich 1973, 58). People learn very little of their own volition, as “learning becomes a commodity, and, like any commodity that is marketed, it becomes scarce” (Illich 1973, 59). As you climb higher on the social and economic ladder of education, the number of people who can afford that privilege diminishes until you are standing at the top of a pyramid built on the commodified packaging of “knowledge.”

This is a diary excerpt from my last visit to the Añorve home, written before reading Tools for Conviviality:

“I want to learn so much. It’s this strong desire to know something besides books. As I was thinking about it today, its not about knowing exactly how to construct certain things, its that the ideas are there, the awareness of the necessity to do something different, and the creativity to figure out how to do it.”

In a convivial society learning should be “self-initiated, self-chosen” (Illich 1973, 61). In my time spent with César it was clear to me that he actively encourages this kind of self-initiated learning. He did not seek out formal speaking arrangements or organize formal classes, but rather worked with anyone who took the initiative to come to him and express an interest, who made themselves open and available for convivial learning to take place. Both times I came to visit him I learned by doing, by
being flexible and jumping into whatever project was going on. From filling molds of
dry toilets with cement, to excavating for a rainwater cistern, to talking in the garden
for hours, each moment was an invaluable learning experience.
“Development Speak”

My thesis carrel at Wesleyan is in the far corner of the top floor of the library. Next to a small pathos plant, vines creeping out towards a skylight above, is *The Development Dictionary*, which I just got through our inter-library loan service. It’s kind of like Christmas when you get a book from far away libraries. I ordered the Dictionary two weeks ago when Oliver Fröhling told me that Arturo Escobar “is part of the club,” and that he has an essay in the Dictionary. Oliver was my professor this past year, a U.S.-educated human geographer who taught “Issues in Development Economics and Alternatives” and who traveled with us to three of the four countries. He is a German ex-pat, married to a Mexican woman, Pilar, with whom he has two “offspring,” as he refers to them. He went to Mexico to study the Zapatistas and stayed. A tall man with a brown handlebar mustache, he’s been spotted wearing a cowboy hat and has a small bean farm outside of Oaxaca City.

On the cover of the Dictionary, there is one of those ads for the book editor’s forthcoming book:

In his seminal DEVELOPMENT DICTIONARY, Wolfgang Sachs and his colleagues convincingly showed that economic development was the problem rather than the solution. Now in his equally seminal GLOBAL ECOLOGY, Sachs and his colleagues show us that it is only at the grassroots level rather than at the global level, that the sustainable society we are all talking about can be brought into being. –EDWARD GOLDSMITH, *THE ECOLOGIST*
Teddy Goldsmith—it took me a second to realize that’s the founder of IHP!

“Small socioeconomic world,” I thought to myself, ironically using a turn of phrase with which my friend from a wealthy Boston suburb describes the interconnected world of business that surrounds her. But César’s and Gustavo’s world begins indeed to look like a club. Skimming the table of contents for Escobar, my eyes fall first upon Gustavo’s piece: “Development,” page 6.

Reading the chapter, I kept thinking, “I’ve read this before.” But where? Then, “No, I haven’t read it.” It’s the first lecture Gustavo gave in Washington D.C., before we all headed off on our nine months abroad. Or maybe not the lecture, but the reading he assigned us. What I saw, read, and heard under Gustavo’s direction blur as I read through the text, realizing that there are certain phrases I can finish in my head before I get to the next line. “For two thirds of the world population today, to think of development—of any kind of development—first requires they think of themselves as…”

… underdeveloped.” I had no idea how much these ideas had impacted me, how much they had made sense in light of what we were seeing, and how much of it had stuck with me, over a year later, on my return in Connecticut.

“It is a reminder of what they are not,” Gustavo goes on. “It is a reminder of an undesirable, undignified condition” (Esteva, 1992). And after this line, Gustavo begins to detail the evolution of the idea of economic development, then the advent of the so-called Basic Needs Approach and of ideas revising the original development paradigm, such as human-centered development, integrated development,
redevelopment, and sustainable development, further entrenching the idea of “underdevelopment” as something real, as some objective condition to be overcome or escaped from. Then he discusses the notion of the “New Commons,” in which men and women are disengaging from the market and redefining “needs” to reflect their own realities, to re-embed self-initiated learning and healing and growing in the fabric of daily life. This is exactly what I see going on in Cesar’s work.

**My Understanding of “Development”**

Since its inception in the late 1940s the project of “development” reshaped the social and economic landscape of Mexico. Back at Wesleyan in the fall of 2009, with my days at César’s compound still fresh in mind, I spent countless hours pouring over World Bank reports, the *Human Development Index*, and political science journals trying to grasp the depth and scope of such an enormous ideological project. I found that the swaths of statistics and rhetorical abstractions made my mind numb and my experiences of day-to-day life in Mexico appear irrelevant in the face of so many “expert” opinions. I also found that while there is much debate within the development literature on how to best go about *doing* “development,” the notion of development itself as a positive indicator of affluence and better living standards are largely taken for granted. In what follows I will offer my version of the implementation of development ideas in Mexico and explore some of the contradictions of the discourse and practice of development inspired by the critiques
coming from a Mexican community of activist scholars as to de-stabilize some of the often-unquestioned assumptions on which development theory depends.

In Harry S. Truman’s 1949 inaugural address the concept of “development,” and with it, its inextricable other, “underdevelopment,” were first brought into the mainstream political arena. Truman advocated U.S. intervention in the “underdeveloped areas” of the world in order to “lighten the burden of the poor” through “greater production as the key to prosperity and peace” (Truman 1949, as quoted in Illich 1992). This call to action took place after the Bretton Woods conference. In Mexico, the notion of development had already captured the imaginations of campesinos and presidents alike.

Beginning in the early 1950s, Mexico put in place an import-substitution industrialization scheme that David Barkin has described as “a long term development strategy to industrialize its predominantly agricultural economy” (Barkin 1989, 99). This import substitution strategy focused on developing industry to produce consumer goods that had hitherto been imported for middle and upper class Mexicans’ consumption, “stimulating production ill-suited to the needs of most Mexicans who remained poor” (Barkin 1989, 100). During the ’50s and ’60s the government focused on subsidizing heavy industry and the agro-industry of fruits and vegetables for export. Again, there was little attention paid to rural farmers, and production of basic foodstuffs fell precipitously (Barkin 1989, 100). To offset the scarcity of staple foods, billions of dollars were spent importing basic foodstuffs that could have gone to servicing the debt. Budget deficits were compounded by lax
macroeconomic policies, which were tolerated into the 1970s as oil revenues and foreign borrowing propped up the economy.

Nevertheless, during the 1960s and ’70s Mexico appeared to be doing well economically due to this boost to production. The GDP per capita increased rapidly, peaking in 1981 (World Development Indicators 2008). This meant that Mexicans were, on average, cumulatively getting richer. But since GDP per capita growth is calculated by taking the total output of the nation and dividing by the population, this yard-stick of “development” cannot account for income disparities and can be skewed by dominant industries like, at the time, it was disproportionately skewed by the output of the national oil industry, PEMEX.

While oil prices worldwide skyrocketed in the ’70s and into the early ’80s, the Mexican government borrowed extensively from international lenders to finance expensive drilling and other infrastructure projects to expand the industry. As a result of this extensive borrowing, between 1977 and 1980, PEMEX accounted for 37 percent of foreign debt (Library of Congress 2008). Furthermore, of the national capital expenditures between 1975 and 1981 over 50 percent was spent on the oil industry. This borrowing and spending was based upon the expectation that oil revenues would continue to rise, so the government continued to borrow beyond its ability to pay back its loans. By relying so heavily on an export commodity the Mexican government made itself vulnerable to the ups and downs of the international market, a vulnerability that became evident during the global recession of the late ’70s and early ’80s.
In an effort to combat the effects of the 1970s global economic crisis and with an eye to controlling social unrest, the PRI (the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional, or the Institutional Revolutionary Party) Mexico’s right wing ruling party who controlled the presidency and most of the political arena from the 1930s to 2000, nationalized many industries to maintain employment. “The number of state enterprises more than doubled between 1970 and 1980,” David Harvey explains in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, “as did the number of their employees. But these enterprises were losing money and the state had to borrow to fund them” (Harvey 2005, 99). To Mexico’s ultimate misfortune, the government did not have trouble taking out loans, as recent oil discoveries made them an attractive prospect for the New York investment banks, pockets full of petrodollars from the Middle East, and eager to find quick placement for it in the form of loans. As a result, “the foreign debt rose from $6.8 billion in 1972 to $58 billion by 1982” (Harvey 2005, 99).

In 1982, Mexico’s default on these loans triggered the Latin American debt crisis. As Norio Usui explains, “the [Mexican] government’s attitude toward foreign borrowing… was the primary cause of the 1982 debt crisis,” Mexico could not keep up with the sharp rise of the interest rate due to disinflationary monetary policies in the lending countries (Usui 1998). Noting the often-predatory lending policies coupled with questionable political situations in borrower countries, it is important to remember the lending institutions were complicit in causing the crisis as well. When Mexico’s Finance Minister, Jesús Silva-Herzog, announced that the country would be defaulting, many large international banks stopped lending in Latin America and decided to call due loans that countries expected to be refinanced (Pastor 1987).
Brazil, Venezuela, Argentina, and Chile among other countries, defaulted one right after the other, many feared a total financial collapse. The following negotiations to stabilize defaulting country’s economies would have profound effects throughout Latin America.

It was in this context of economic crisis, Harvey notes, that what he calls “the core neoliberal states,” meaning the industrialized nations promoting free market policies, gave the IMF and the World Bank full authority in 1982 to negotiate debt relief with defaulting countries. While this presented these international bodies with the perfect situation to impose their economic agenda in the region, as Harvey argues, it was also seen as a necessary measure to protect the world’s main financial institutions from the threat of default (Harvey 2005, 73). Once international petroleum prices stabilized and then declined in the early 1980s, export revenues in Latin American newly industrialized countries were insufficient to pay back debt inflated by high interest rates, and as the foreign loans dried up, these countries experienced high inflation and bouts of severe recession throughout the 1980s (McGuire 1995, 220). In a world economic climate in which Mexico had very little leverage, the Mexican government was persuaded, if not coerced, to begin the transition to neoliberalism.

Development critics and proponents alike aptly refer to the 1980s as the “Lost Decade” in Latin America. Starting in 1982, the IMF-mandated structural adjustment measures taken by the Mexican government decreased social spending and increased taxes. They lifted general subsidies and devalued the currency, making it difficult for many to afford staple foods. Real wages fell between 7.7 and 10.5 percent annually
between 1983 and 1988, amounting to a 41.5 percent decline over the five-year period (Friedmann et al. 1995, 335). And still Mexico continued to limp doggedly forward on the march toward progress.

Neoliberalism: A Global Project

The term “neoliberalism,” while sometimes used interchangeably with “development” and “capitalism,” describes a particular ideology grounded in a belief in the freedom of economic actors, the rationale of which can and often is applied to further the goals of development, but did not gain global popularity until the 1980s. While the transition to neoliberalism in Mexico began immediately after the debt crisis of 1982, the implementation of the most aggressive neoliberal policies occurred in the late ’80s and early ’90s, and these became the foundation for the economic policy that continues to shape the Mexican political, social, and economic landscape today.

“Neoliberalism,” which did not enter my vocabulary until my second year of university when I was introduced to the writing of David Harvey, is a household word in much of Latin America, said either with disdain or pride depending on who is speaking. In contrast, while much of my own country’s foreign policy is shaped by neoliberal ideology, it is a word that has hardly expanded outside of policy or academic circles. A Cambridge graduate with a PhD in Geography, Harvey is perhaps best known for his critique of global capitalism. In A Brief History of Neoliberalism, Harvey offers a concise account of neoliberalism’s political philosophy as grounding the organization of what he calls the “neoliberal state”: “According to theory the
neoliberal state should favour strong individual private property rights, the rule of law, and the institutions of freely functioning markets and free trade. These are the institutional arrangements considered essential to guarantee individual freedoms [which underpin neoliberalism]” (Harvey 2005, 64). Neoliberal reforms, therefore, must include privatization and deregulation combined with market competition, which are believed “to eliminate bureaucratic red tape, increase efficiency and productivity, improve quality [of production], and reduce costs, both directly to the consumer through cheaper commodities and services and indirectly through reduction of the tax burden” (Harvey 2005, 65).

Over the past two decades neoliberalism theory has greatly shaped the policies of large international institutions such as the IMF, the World Bank, and the WTO. These institutions have been critical in the channeling of neoliberal ideas to “developing” countries. As Harvey states, “International agreements between states guaranteeing the rule of law and freedoms of trade, such as those now incorporated in the World Trade Organization agreements, are critical to the advancement of the neoliberal project on the global stage” (Harvey 2005, 66). These international agreements, in other words, contribute to setting up the conditions for programs that fight poverty and “underdevelopment” not through state intervention but rather through liberalization. Under the prevailing assumption “that ‘a rising tide lifts all boats’, or of ‘trickle down’,” states Harvey, “neoliberal theory holds that the elimination of poverty (both domestically and worldwide) can best be secured through free markets and free trade” (Harvey 2005, 64). This idea was behind two of the biggest initiatives since the 1980s, namely the oil industry and water management,
about which I have elaborated earlier in this chapter and in chapter one. In each case we can see that privatization and deregulation have had the opposite effect of the description above.

For example, the oil industry has recently undergone major reforms in Mexico. The reforms have largely moved toward privatization, with the justification being greater accountability in the industry and more effective management, just as Harvey states. However, PEMEX has still been resorting to massive borrowing and owes more than the value of its assets (Cevallos 2008). When I was in Mexico in January 2009, the rates I was paying at the PEMEX pump were more than double what I was paying for gasoline in the United States. There have also been widespread allegations that PEMEX delivers “baptized gas” (gasoline cut with water to meet weight requirements) and stations rigging their pumps to dispense only nine liters for the price of ten. This hardly exemplifies the increased efficiency and reduced costs extolled by proponents of privatization.

As for the decentralization and privatization of water, as described in chapter one, it was carried out with backing from international funding organizations, which see privatization and decentralization as the means to more efficient and equitable water management, as key components to a successful water reform strategy (Asad, et al. 1999; Garn 1998). However, these processes have actually worsened the situation in Mexico, making it more difficult for local water managers and forcing them to open their organizations to privatization, which has resulted in greatly increased costs for small time water users.
The epitome of the universalizing grip of neoliberalism, as Harvey notes, is that the “opening of capital markets is now a condition of membership of the IMF and WTO” (Harvey 2005, 72). The IMF and WTO are, respectively, the world’s largest financial and trade regulatory institutions, and for a nation state not to seek membership in these institutions is the equivalent of economic suicide. For all intents and purposes these institutions, through their membership requirements are making it impossible to survive in the world market unless the state adopts some measure of free market policies. Because of the totalizing manner in which these institutions seek to structure the world economy through the implementation of neoliberal policies, I would categorize them as having what in Tools for Conviviality Illich terms a “radical monopoly” on the processes of exchange that occur in society.

One could argue that the fact that “economics” is treated as a separate sphere of life, distinct from our day to day practices of exchange, indicates that this “radical monopoly” extends to the way we think about exchange, that is, exclusively in monetary terms and with profit, rather than social networking and support, as its goal. In The Development Dictionary, Gérald Berthoud writes, “The process of commoditization which transform all spheres of social life is at work throughout the world, with varying effects. We see here the extent to which development, as a policy and a practice, is a forceful attempt to implant new ways of thinking and acting which follow the rules of the market” (1992, 80). Seen in this light, the imposition of a market economy, particularly the neoliberal free market economics that was dominant through the 1990s in Latin America, monopolizes systems of exchange in which things as well as people are reduced to commodities through both the monetization of
the economy and the reduction of people to the exchange value of their labor. The
market, both as a concept and in practice as an institution, holds a “radical monopoly”
over the ways people think and act. As Illich says, “Radical monopoly reflects the
industrial institutionalization of values” (1973, 54).

For Berthoud, in other words, this radical monopoly of the market rules over
society and social relationships: “In this new era, the market is not considered merely
as a technical device for the allocation of goods and services, but rather as the only
possible way to regulate society” (1992, 70). Through the “institutionalization of
values,” then, the “market becomes the leading principle for guiding individual and
collective action” (1992, 70). Illich’s warning against radical monopolies is
particularly poignant in light of the necessity of integration of national and
international capitalist markets, which is implicit in virtually all development theory
and policy (Berthoud 1992, 71). This insight is the basis of Illich’s most powerful but
also most challenging critique, that social ills like poverty can be successfully fought
with more efficient production. He writes, instead that “protection against radical
monopoly depends on a political consensus opposed to growth” (Illich 1973, 57).

Pessimistically, I feel this may be a long time in coming, as unremitting growth is the
raison d’être of capitalist society. However, the small islands of conviviality
emerging in Mexico, the shores of which I was privileged enough to stroll along, give
me hope that we are in some way working toward a consensus on the limitations of
the current economic model based on the pursuit of economic growth at the expense
of society and the earth.
Neoliberalism and its Mexican Manifestations: Policy and Personal Experience

Emerging from the economically devastating decade of the ’80s, the Mexican government agreed in 1989 to the Brady Plan, in the hope that the debt relief proposed by the plan would allow some breathing room to recover and eventually be able to pay back outstanding debts. Under the Brady Plan, major financial institutions offered to write down 35 percent of their outstanding debt for discounted bonds, which were underwritten by the IMF and US Treasury. However, the price tag of the relief package was the forced implementation of neoliberal reforms (Harvey 2005, 75).

Carlos Salinas de Gortari, a Harvard educated economist, was President of Mexico from 1988 to 1994, representing the PRI. Salinas was responsible for signing the Brady Plan and implementing the mandated reforms, many of which coincided with the policy recommendations of what is commonly referred to as the “Washington Consensus.” The phrase was coined by John Williamson, an economist, professor, and previous advisor to the IMF, who compiled a set of policy prescriptions, all of which were aligned with neoliberal philosophy and recommended by Washington during the ’80s and ’90s as the “standard” reform package for “underdeveloped” countries (Williamson 1989).

The recommendations outlined in the Washington Consensus and implemented by Salinas included trade liberalization, particularly with regard to imports, the centerpiece of policies leading up to and mandated by NAFTA. Salinas opened up Mexico to direct foreign investment and expanded the maquila program (Harvey 2005, 101). Through trade liberalization and deregulation, another
Consensus recommendation, import barriers were lowered and subsidized U.S. agricultural goods flooded the Mexican market (Harvey 2005, 101). Also under Salinas the government carried out an extensive privatization of state enterprises, which was particularly hard as employment in the state sector was halved during his presidency. He also re-privatized the Mexican banking system in 1990 and in 1991 reformed Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution to allow for and encourage the privatization of *ejido* lands.

As I indicated earlier, after the 1982 debt crisis, that is, a few years before Salinas’s presidency, there were many policy adjustments that paved the way for the broadly sweeping “reforms” he was able to implement during his six years in office. These adjustments included a shift toward privatization of state industry, which resulted in a gradual but definite reduction of the state sector, from 1,100 state owned firms at the time of the crisis to only 200 by the year 2000 (Harvey 2005, 101), as well as in the privatization and decentralization of services, which produced severe cuts in social spending.

In what follows, I focus on each of these aspects of economic policy in Mexico from the early 1980s to the early 2000s: cuts in social spending, privatization, and property.

*Cuts in social spending*

As a part of the structural adjustment of the 1980s programs targeted to the poor, such as those aimed at improving regional and rural development, were subject to sharp cuts (Friedmann, et al. 1995, 349). Two such programs were PIDER, a rural
development program and COMPLAMAR, a federal agency aimed at providing health care in poor regions, intended to improve human capital and infrastructure in so-called marginal areas. These programs did not survive budget cuts and the process of decentralization. Growth of infrastructure through COMPLAMAR fell to zero between 1985 and 1989, and state providers absorbed the previously federally funded and administered services. In 1989, COMPLAMAR was finally absorbed into the new anti-poverty program, Solidaridad or PRONASOL, launched by President Salinas, which would only last until 1997 (Friedmann, et al. 1995).

Harvey describes some of the effects of the cuts in social spending which came hand in hand with neoliberal reforms wherever these were applied: “As the state withdraws from welfare provision and diminishes its role in arenas such as healthcare, public education, and social services... it leaves larger and larger segments of the population exposed to impoverishment” (Harvey 2005, 76). Viewed through the lens of Illich’s “radical monopoly” concept, one could argue that the effects of spending cuts were compounded by the fact that the neediest populations were dependent on state-run healthcare and education systems and therefore vulnerable to the effects of any abrupt changes when these services were cut down with nothing put in place to fill the void.

*Privatization and decentralization of healthcare and education*

The neoliberal reforms to the healthcare system have had a deleterious effect on the provision of services. Cruz Rivera et al. state that “since 1982, austerity budgets and the decentralization of health care services to the states have exacerbated

The decentralization of education services similarly exacerbated preexisting disparities. “Decentralizations of primary and secondary school administration in Argentina and Mexico have been criticized for simply passing the costs on to lower levels of government, which, particularly in poorer regions, lack the requisite administrative and revenue-raising capabilities” (Lloyd-Sherlock 2000, 114). It is evident that states in Mexico were unprepared to cover the costs of decentralization as overall teacher salaries fell 33% in real terms between 1983 and 1990 and rural teachers were paid even less than those in urban areas (Pastor and Wise 1997, 448).

As if the gap between educational investment in the urban and rural sectors wasn’t enough, a disproportionate amount of government funds are concentrated in tertiary education. “The Mexican government continues to spend 41 percent of education expenditures on university subsidies, while primary education subsidies amount to just 12% of public expenditure on education” (Pastor and Wise 1997, 449). Nearly a decade later, the disparity remained: in 2005, 42 percent of education expenditure went to tertiary education and only 15 percent to primary education (World Development Indicators 2008). What this means is that around 40 percent of state investment on education goes to serve the small urban elites who have the financial and cultural capitals to access such institutions, while in the context of a society explicitly biased towards formal education, this disparity in funding further
marginalizes the majority of the population who do not have access to, or choose not to pursue, tertiary education.

In Illich’s discussion of radical monopolies he explicitly reflects on the debilitating effects of such monopolies in the areas of healthcare and education. He writes, “Radical monopoly imposes compulsory consumption and thereby restricts personal autonomy. It constitutes a special kind of social control because it is enforced by means of the imposed consumption of a standard product that only large institutions can provide” (Illich 1973, 53). In the case of education the “standard product,” in Illich’s view, is prepackaged knowledge imposed in a top down fashion by those who are have authority because they have “consumed” more “knowledge” through the educational system; this is fundamentally different from “learning,” which Illich emphasizes as the real goal of education. In health care it is the monopoly of “experts,” who have consumed the appropriate amount of knowledge in medical school and who are, as a result, invested with the authority over “health”; this, according to Illich, is fundamentally different from “healing,” which should be the real objective of healthcare.

It is the ability to learn and to heal in convivial society that is at the center of Illich’s proposals for change. When limits have been placed on radical monopolies such as those in education and health care, learning and healing are regenerated through community-based arrangements and self-reliance. This kind of reliance is not possible in the context of radical monopolies since they foster relations of dependency in which people feel the institutions are more capable than the healers and teachers of “traditional” society. As a result, Illich explains, “people give up their
native ability to do what they can do for themselves and each other” (1973, 54). This decrease in self-reliance is particularly damaging in the context of neoliberalism, as institutional support is slashed from national budgets and many are immobilized due to the conception that only major institutions, as opposed to your relatives and neighbors, are capable of providing these fundamental services.

**Private property**

In the process of privatization, a perquisite to enter the world economic stage, the Mexican state dug even deeper into the cultural fabric, attempting to dislodge the very roots of indigenous society, the *ejido* system of communal land ownership. As a necessary component for adopting the terms of NAFTA, Salinas amended Article 27 of the Constitution, allowing *ejido* land to now be legally bought, sold, and rented (Gledhill 1998). In effect, he privatized communal land to make way for free trade. The change was meant to help “modernize” agriculture and bring Mexico’s property laws into line with their partners in NAFTA, the United States and Canada.

If we are to follow neoliberal logic, one of the aims of private property rights systems is to protect against the so-called “tragedy of the commons” (Harvey 2005), a concept that refers to the tendency of individuals to overexploit communal resources. But the “tragedy of the commons” is based upon the assumption that people are inherently self-interested, an idea that grounds many development programs and that is, in turn, heavily promoted by them. As Berthoud writes, “Development is the destruction of ethnic identities and solidarity networks in order to promote the legitimacy of self-interest as a fundamental human motivation” (1992, 81).
Illich notes that it is difficult to move beyond a radical monopoly “when independent action has been paralyzed for so long that the ability for it seems to have atrophied, and when simple alternatives seem beyond the reach of the imagination” (1973, 55). In Mexico, however, the EZLN (*Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*), to whom Gustavo acted as an advisor, are doing exactly that, working to re-imagine a world outside of the development paradigm, to be given (or to take) the space within such a totalizing project to live and govern autonomously and by their own logic. Indigenous groups like those represented by the Zapatistas saw the imposition of private property laws as just what Berthoud says it was, the destruction of their indigenous identity and an attempt to dissolve the solidarity created through living and farming communally or, as Illich would say, convivially.

The implementation of NAFTA and the changes to Article 27 were, indeed, seen by the Zapatistas as a “death sentence” for the indigenous peoples of Mexico (Chomsky and McChesney 1998). This was a part of their January 1st, 1994, declaration, the day NAFTA went into effect and the day the Zapatistas officially began their uprising against the Mexican government. The movement has been characterized as precisely a “response to neoliberal attempts to restructure Mexican rural society” (Gledhill 1998). And the links between this and other movements in Mexico became clear to me during my stay there in 2008. Not surprisingly, in the time I spent in Zapatista territory in April that year, I often came across Cesar’s toilets.
Shifting Landscapes

More and less organized groups like the Zapatistas and Illich’s network of “deprofessionalized intellectuals” have been working to restore “the commons.” As I see it, the work César does aims to do the opposite of overexploiting. He is regenerating the commons by producing pieces of appropriate technology that compel us to view water as a resource to which everyone should have access rather than as a commodity and to reconceptualize this resource as a shared gift and therefore a shared responsibility.

After dedicating so much of this chapter to the description of neoliberalism as both a global project holding a set of “radical monopolies” on society, it is important to me to now turn to those aspects of my experience in Mexico that did not exemplify development’s assumption of the universal character of western values. My lived experience was not a clear cut binary of power and resistance, but rather something much more complex and interesting, something that broke the internal logic of and operated outside and beyond the binary.

While driving with Luisa through Ocotepec, the pueblo in Cuernavaca where the Añorve family lives and works and where Illich lived and worked until his death, she turned to me with a half smile and a hint of pride in her voice and asked if I knew that Ocotepec was a “pueblo ingobernable,” that is, an “ungovernable town or people.” While the pueblo is still considered one of the municipalities of Cuernavaca (unlike the Zapatistas who have fought for autonomy from the state), the city police are not allowed to enter the pueblo. I asked Luisa how this works, as I could not
imagine such a peaceful pueblo maintaining its tranquility without law enforcement. Her answer was that the people of Ocotepec “have their own police, the ones from here, and when the police from outside try to come in they get kidnapped. And the police from here take them to their own jail.”

In Ocotepec, they govern themselves though the usos y costumbres system, a system of customary law that dictates the indigenous means of deciding who will be the municipal authorities, who will sit on the asamblea (the decision making body), and who will take what cargos, (a system of one to three year terms doing some kind of service to the community). Typically, only those whose were born in the pueblo participate, and other families such as the Añorves, who only moved there sixteen years ago, pay taxes for the privilege of living within the community, but only peripherally participate in the decision making process. In my experience, the usos y costumbres system is respected in many communities throughout Mexico, though not always to the extent it is in Ocotepec.

“That is why there are so many piratas,” Luisa continues. She is referring to the pirated DVD vendors that line the main road, the Avenida. When I first entered the barrio, I thought there was a carnival going on, that’s how tightly packed the sidewalks were with vendors. “The police are scared to come here,” Luisa said. I asked if she likes the system. “Yes, most of the time, there is less violence here, but the narcos are coming here now. They have their big houses on the hillside. And the police are trying to buy people off, dividing the community, so now the people they’ve bought are talking of letting them in.”
The pueblo has also successfully fought off attempts to build both a COSTCO store and a PEMEX station on the Avenida. But other such battles in Cuernavaca, as Luisa detailed to me, are in recent years tallying more losses than victories, as green spaces and historic sites have been bulldozed to make room for the likes of WalMart, Home Depot, and Sam’s Club. “This is recent,” she said. “Five, ten years ago Cuerna didn’t look like this,” she comments with a huff. The landscape is shifting, in step with shifting national policies.

Later that day Ximel, César’s son, and I entered a new air-conditioned mega-mall to catch “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button,” the latest Brad Pitt flick. I couldn’t help but shiver, both as a response to the cold air and the eerie déjà vu I felt being back in a multiplex theater, the fluorescent lights and glass elevators stirring up my ambivalence toward my own suburban past and my fears toward the prospect that these massive amusement parks of consumption may very well become a defining feature of the social and physical landscape in growing Latin American cities, as they were in my world as a Long Island teenager.

One morning, over Luisa’s delicious breakfast of homemade yogurt, honey roasted granola, and bananas, the topic of Oxxo arose, a 711-like convenience chain. César was telling the funny story of trying to pick up a friend who described his location as “on the corner by the Oxxo.” Cuernavaca is littered with Oxxos. Cesar chuckled and turned to me, “It is the new measure of development, forget the World Bank reports, just count the number of Oxxos there are.” And Luisa brought up the “tiendas de medio uso,” the new thrift stores brimming with American brand names, stating only half-jokingly that “we are even beginning to look like you, to dress like
gringos.” Axa, César’s nephew, chimes in, “It’s like that song, ‘McDolar,’ you know it? It’s like a critique of all of this,” he says, referring to a popular Mexican ska song criticizing the effects of transnationals like McDonalds on people and the environment. Luisa sheepishly told the story of how her friend had a microwave, and she wanted one so badly that she also bought one. “It was so expensive,” she said, that “I had to buy it in payments. I only really wanted it because she already had one. And for the popcorn. I love popcorn.” She promptly got rid of it after another friend told her the inventor of the microwave himself would not keep one in his home for fear of radiation.

While these anecdotes about the “McDonaldization” of Latin America may be seen as somewhat trite examples of the effects of neoliberalism and while I could elaborate on the unique ways Mexicans have adapted to the abundance of supers, as the corporate chains are referred to, the reality is that the homogenization implicit in the mere existence of these chains far outweighs the attempts to give it a “Mexican” face. This imposition, which according to Luisa is often violent, with state police forcefully removing protestors from sites of demonstration against neoliberalism, undoubtedly shapes the people’s lived experience of the city and perceptions of the global north. Unbridled consumption has come to represent modernization and the “good life,” both implicit in the promise of development. Outside of the study of economic policy and vehement academic debates surrounding neoliberalism, these changes can be felt and articulated by anyone who has lived in the city long enough to experience these shifts in the social and physical landscape.
In my understanding of neoliberalism, there is a discord between theory and practice. The paradox lies in the strong attachment to theoretical understandings of the individual as a rational being guided by self-interest and to the freedom of choice, while those exercising this freedom of choice to form strong collective institutions (trade unions, communist parties, convivial societies, etc.) are often met with violent oppression (Harvey 2005). To guard against the formation of collective institutions, which may threaten free market ideology, neoliberals often control governance in democratic nations through institutions like the IMF or Federal Reserve. “This creates the paradox of intense state interventions and government by elites and ‘experts’ in a world where the state is supposed not to be interventionist” (Harvey 2005, 69). If those institutions fail to keep people in line the state turns to persuasion, propaganda, and sometimes raw force in order to squash opposition to neoliberalism, tactics that obviously limit the individual freedom extolled by free marketers.

Mexico, April 2008

Gustavo looked distressed when he entered Unitierra this morning, an unusual look in the perpetual optimist. His house in San Pablo Etla, just outside the city of Oaxaca, had been ransacked the day before. Nothing of economic value had been taken except for his computer and some of his files. While there is no way to prove it, his suspicion that the state was targeting him for his political affiliations does not seem unfounded. Unitierra has strong ties to APPO and many of its members were active in the 2006 uprising. This loose coming together of civil society from all
different regions, ethnic groups, from unions and NGOs, the Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca (the Popular Assembly of Oaxacan Peoples) was the driving force behind the 2006 uprising. The resolutions of the APPO included recognition of indigenous rights and autonomy, political accountability, opposition to neoliberalism and a demand for alternative education. Overtly political, they called for the resignation of Governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz and held the city of Oaxaca for eight months, a period Gustavo refers to as the “Oaxaca Commune.”

Just last week, Nate, a former IHP student now living in Oaxaca and organizing with other Unitierra activists, had been picked up by state police walking home late at night. They roughed him up and threatened to do worse if he didn’t leave the country soon. Just that morning, as I was standing outside before class, a helicopter flying very low was circling the center, and a man in uniform crouched in the doorway with a massive camera looked to be documenting the comings and goings at the center. I have a strong suspicion they were not there to photograph the solar oven, or the flats of vegetables being grown on the roof. Even the presence of a small group of American students seemed cause for state intimidation.

State intervention, government-sanctioned violence, and repression seem to have only escalated since the implementation of neoliberal (that is, non-interventionist) reforms. The turn of the century was expected to mark the “democratization” of Mexico as Vicente Fox, the PAN (Partido de Acción Nacional, the National Action Party) candidate and former Coca-Cola executive, was elected in 2000, breaking the seventy year strong hold of the PRI. However, the decade since the turn of the century has been marked by an increase in state-sponsored violence,
exemplified in the abuses in 2006 against the Oaxaca protests and the escalated violence and repression in Chiapas. The federal government responded to the Oaxaca protests with excessive force, sending over 10,000 federal police and army troops (Independent Media Center UK 2006). An American journalist covering the protests was one of the many killed by paramilitaries affiliated with the PRI (Independent Media Center NYC 2006). In Chiapas the “low-intensity war” against the Zapatistas has been escalating since 1994 and has reached unprecedented heights since “democratization.” The number of military installations in Chiapas rose from five to seventy eight, of which fifty-four are on ejido lands. Eight percent of the national military are stationed in the contested region of Chiapas even though the region constitutes only three percent of the nation’s population (Ortega Oseguera 2008).

Organizing for autonomy, then, does not appear to square with the definition of “individual freedom,” which is apparently limited to the freedom to pursue the desires and wants promised by proponents of a capitalist market system. Activists like the Zapatistas and César and Gustavo advocate finding ways, in Gustavo’s words, to “marginalize the economy” in our lives, instead of allowing it to marginalize us. However, those attempts at constructing a society outside of the logic of capitalism are evidently not permitted within the current framework.

Harvey has the same concern Illich expressed through his discussion of the radical monopolies of hyper-industrial states. He writes, “The boundary between the state and corporate power has become more and more porous.” What remains of representative democracy is overrun by those with money and power (Harvey 2005, 78). Harvey then cites as examples the role of corporate lobbyists, and the revolving
door there is between state employment and corporate employment, the result of which is the state production of “legislation and regulatory frameworks that advantage corporations” (Harvey 2005, 77). As in a radical monopoly, these institutions, the state, the judiciary system, and corporations have become so entrenched that they no longer serve their original purpose and have become destructive.

In one such example of the collusion of state and corporate interests, César told me about the time he was sued for building his dry toilets. We were driving to pick up materials for a composting toilet Axa was building in the Estado de México, outside of the capital city. I asked if he had ever had problems with the state. He answered with a story: “One time the wife of the governor of Oaxaca wanted to start a project with me. We met, and I explained my work to her, and she seemed very excited, but she wanted to manufacture them on an assembly line and to then distribute them. I explained that the workshops were important because people would have work and know how to produce the toilets themselves. She did not see the value in such small-scale production; she wanted to make it something big. I said thank you, but no thank you.”

“And that was it?” I asked.

“No. She took the design, and she went to a large corporation that makes prefabricated bathrooms, and they started producing them, in the manner of the assembly line. Then they started distributing them in small towns, selling them in others. That is how they do it here, politically; they wanted votes. But the people are always wary of government hand-outs, because they always come with obligations.
This company, they patented the design, and they sued me for producing their toilets. I fought with them well. My friend who is a lawyer helped, arguing that I had been making them since the ’80s. It took many years, but they don’t bother be anymore.”

The ideological difference is clear: The governor’s wife wanted to make a business of it while César wants to encourage small, self-sustaining cooperatives. Both appreciate the economic and ecological value of the design, but it is politically motivated people like the governor’s wife who tend to coalesce with major business interests and who in their quest to do something “good for the people” drive out people like César who are working explicitly for the collective good.

In this example, the state and business interests are causing a decrease in self-reliance, the ability to produce and adapt these technologies on a small scale. I would argue the same is true of most state and corporate treatment of water management. As I argued earlier by citing Illich, a radical monopoly like a system of water management restricts personal autonomy by imposing compulsory consumption. “It constitutes a special kind of social control,” to quote Illich again, “because it is enforced by means of the imposed consumption of a standard product that only large institutions can provide” (1973, 53). This is especially true in the case of massive infrastructure projects for water management and of the ever-growing bottled water industry. Mega dam projects displace people and destroy ecosystems to provide water and electricity for industrial agriculture and urban centers. Systems of piped water immobilize communities as they watch their existing water supply dwindle through state and corporate extraction. This fits like hand in glove the increased dependency on bottled water, as previously potable sources are polluted or tapped dry. As Harvey
says, there is “an inner connection, therefore, between technological dynamism, instability, dissolution of social solidarities, environmental degradation, deindustrialization, rapid shifts in time-space relations, speculative bubbles, and the general tendency toward crisis formation within capitalism” (2005, 69).

**Connecticut, November 2008**

Holed up in my thesis carrel months later, G-Chat-ing with Oliver in Oaxaca, it happened again: I was complaining about what I saw as unquestionable assumptions in readings for my class on “Latin American Development” and telling him that this theory seemed very removed from my experiences in Mexico, when he suggested I read *Distorted Development* by David Barkin. I quickly searched it in the online library catalog: “On Loan”—“Damn!” I say to myself. “Who else is reading twenty-year-old books on development in Mexico?” My eyes scanned my three-foot stack of books with titles like *The Globalizers*, *Market Democracy*, and *Latin America After Neoliberalism*, and I realize it’s me; I have the book. I took it out months ago and dismissed it as just-another-development-text. I was grabbing the book when it all clicked: Gustavo introduced me to Barkin in Mexico City. He gave one of our foundation lectures on “Imagining Alternatives to Capitalism” in the living room with the teal colored tiles in that house in Santo Domingo. I now distinctly remember that he introduced himself by saying, “I have had the great misfortune of having been trained as an economist.” Funny, that’s exactly what César said about being an architect.
In *Distorted Development*, Barkin writes that “stabilization policies themselves have extracted a substantial sacrifice from the majority of the poor and middle income groups while privileging a very small group of industrialists, commercial farmers, and professionals” (1990, 104). The result is that most Mexicans made less money and worked more hours in 1990 than they did in 1980, and the economy was less capable of producing basic goods and services. The dream of development, ever increasingly shaped by neoliberal ideology, seems to be getting ever further from the reach of most Mexicans rather than closer. It could be argued that the possibility of being “developed” in the image of countries like the United States never really existed, except as an image, outside the circles of development elites, as the dream was propped up by volatile oil money and very risky borrowing. Even by World Bank standards it took until 1999, nearly two decades, to achieve pre-debt crisis income levels as measured in GDP per capita, and the Gini coefficient of income inequality was the same in 2004 as it was in 1977 (World Development Indicators 2008). Measured in four different indices, “poverty” by all accounts was substantially higher in 2002 than it was in 1981 (Damián and Boltvinik, 2006).
In January 2009 I went back to Mexico for a month. My plans for what I would do there were vague. All I knew was that I was going back to the Añorve home and felt a little nervous about returning, but with hopes of learning all that I could. I deliberately chose not to make definite plans as I share Gustavo’s view that “Planning is… arrogance, hubris. [It is] pretending to know the future and even worst, to be able to control it” (Esteva 2004). When I am living by the clock, with a rigid itinerary (as is customary in industrial society) I find myself closed off. The most unexpected things happen when you make yourself open and available. “True learning,” Illich once said, “can only be the leisurely practice of free people” (Esteva 2004). So I arrived in Cuernavaca at about two in the afternoon on New Year’s Day and dialed the house from a payphone at the bus station hoping that there would be someone to pick up. Otherwise I’d have to take a cab.

The first few weeks I spent a lot of time “hanging out with a purpose,” moving between the Añorve place and César’s office, in Illich’s former home, where his partner Doña Valentina still resides. Some days I would do translations for him or graphic design work. Other days I would go with Ximel and Axa to work on building a house César had designed a few blocks up the hill. The third week I went on a five-hour drive north-west to Michoacán with César, not expecting that I would stay seven days in the small town of Comachuén, but I did.
César had been asked by A.T.M., a Mexico City nonprofit organization with the meaning-laden name “Ayúdame que yo También soy Mexicano”—“Help me, as I too am Mexican”—to facilitate a weeklong workshop in Comachuén on building rainwater cisterns. César, Ramiro (one of his albañiles, or masons), Ana (an architecture student from Oaxaca), and I piled into his two-door red hatchback. His plan was to go only for a day and to leave Ramiro and Ana in charge of the workshop. When we got there, I decided to stay with Ramiro and Ana. I wanted to learn how to build cisterns, and I wanted to do it alongside the fascinating, spirited group of people that would attend the workshop.

During the week I spent in Comachuén I learned how to build a cistern, and much more. I had the opportunity to observe, participate, and be complicit in development work as it is experienced by deliverers and recipients, through personal interactions “on the ground.” At times, weighed down by development theory, it is easy to forget that the concept of development, the centerpiece of that socially, culturally, and economically homogenizing paradigm, is actually a quotidian, lived reality for many people. It is also easy to forget that the organizations, both local and global, that deliver development programs around the world are made of people, who are as complex in their intentions, perspectives, desires, and actions as the people who receive their services.

In this chapter, therefore, I attempt to separate my critique of the paradigm, of the discourses and practices of development and of how these manifest in the work of a particular institution, ATM, from the actual people who carry these discourses to the field and who implement the practices that, ultimately, are what we call
development. I do this, not to minimize their agency, but to emphasize their subjectivity and show that the discourses and practices of development are, to a great extent, negotiated in the field through a complicated process of cultural and ideological translation and mistranslation.

As Oliver Fröhling, my International Development and Economics professor in Oaxaca, et al. write in “NGOs and the Globalization of Managerialism,” “One of the most overlooked aspects of globalization is the circulation of modern managerial practices and knowledges through transnational networks of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)” (Fröhling et al. 2005, 1845). I do not mean to trivialize the work ATM is doing, but rather I wish to reflect on the ways in which this work is informed by, and informs my understanding of, the larger development paradigm. “It is important to recognize NGO staff as knowledgeable and heterogeneous agents,” Fröhling et al. continue, “with sophisticated and diverse understanding of the institutional, social, economic and political context within which they carry out their project” (2005, 1850).

A.T.M. is based in Mexico City, but has projects in Oaxaca, Michoacán, and the Estado de México. Their mission is to facilitate the autoconstrucción, or self-building, of sustainable housing for low-income families and communities. For the project I took part in they had identified thirty “beneficiaries” to participate in a week long training, learning to build rainwater cisterns. The attendees would later go on to form work teams to build their own. The deal was that A.T.M. would supply the materials if the participants supplied the labor.
When I first heard the name of the organization leading the workshop, “Ayúdame que yo También soy Mexicano,” I laughed, but it was a kind of nervous, confused laughter. What did it mean? Who is asking for help? Why the need to reassert their status as Mexican citizens? And what kind of dynamic does the organization’s name presuppose between it and the community members it has set out to “help”? I wasn’t sure how to react, if they were kidding or not, or if something had been lost in translation. Tonio, the self-proclaimed “environmental fundamentalist” from D.F., one of the ATM coordinators, smiled back and flippantly said “A todo madre,” playing off the ATM acronym with a Mexican colloquialism meaning “cool” or “awesome.”

During the course of the week I spent in Comachuén, I would think of this title often, of its different possible ironic meanings. The first word “ayúdame”—“help me”—needs to be examined in light of the organization’s urban roots and the so-called beneficiaries’ rural and indigenous ancestry. As Gronemeyer writes in her chapter on “Helping” in the Dictionary, it is necessary to reflect on the “relation of superiority and inferiority that help creates; the shame of the receiver and the arrogance of the giver” (Gronemeyer 1992, 65). Given the history of the relationship between the Mexican postcolonial state and the region’s indigenous peoples, which history books commonly describe as “paternalistic,” the choice of the term “ayúdame” must be seen as discursively stemming from and reproducing the historically unequal and paternalistic relationship between urbanite professional organizers or “experts” and the indigenous communities.
In hearing the second part of the title, “*que yo También soy Mexicano*”—“as I too am Mexican,” I could not help but wonder how the organization defines “Mexican.” The name seems to imply that being Mexican means being entitled to a certain standard or style of living and, for those historically marginalized who may have put their indigenous identity before their national one, to “help” in bettering their “quality of life.” The project “beneficiaries” are then being defined in relationship to the Mexican nation-state, or rather in relationship to their historical disenfranchisement. Gronemeyer writes “Development help” is “help in the overcoming of a deficit” (1992, 65), just as the process of developing is “help” in overcoming the undignified condition of being “underdeveloped.” Claiming national identity means, in this context, claiming the right to be “helped.”

What, then, is ATM “helping” the project participants to do exactly? As I will argue further in this chapter, the work of ATM can be seen as an effort to prepare participants for their future insertion into the market economy. As I touched upon in chapter one, a break with traditional customs is a prerequisite to economic progress (Sadie 1960, 302). In the pursuit of progress “[help] conducts a struggle with backwardness” (Gronemeyer 1992, 59). As “backwardness” and “tradition” are development’s other to be overcome, help is now “the mobilization of the will to break with the past” (Pearson 1969, 9). However, in helping others to overcome their underdeveloped state, ATM is advertently or inadvertently creating a relationship of dependency. This kind of relationship fosters the opposite of the autonomous coping so central to Illich’s convivial societies.
Excavation

Find a spot where you can direct the flow of water from the roof to the cistern. Draw a plan in the dirt, marking out where your *viguetas* will go and calculate the number of *bovedillas* you will need. Dig. Make sure your walls are smooth and perfectly round (no roots or rocks sticking out, they’re points of weakness where the walls will eventually crack).

Comachuén, Day 1:

César, Ana, and I started sketching out a plan for the excavation in the dirt. It is chilly and the clouds are hovering just above the deep green pine-forested hills. On an area six meters long, we started marking off every seventy centimeters where the *viguetas*, reinforced concrete I-beams, would go to form the cistern’s top and every twenty five centimeters where the *bovedillas*, a type of hollowed brick, would go as a filler between the support beams.

We were carving out our plan on the dusty soccer field downhill of the secondary school where one of the two cisterns would be built. The workshop participants would be divided into two groups of fifteen each, and Ramiro would move between the soccer field and the other work site. Five of the school’s teachers, including the director, came down to the field. The director said a few formal words of thank you and went on to talk about how the government had promised water for years but had never come through, that even though they now had toilets for the girls,
they had no water to flush them. My stomach clenched a little at the thought that, once the cistern is in place, they will be wasting their water by using it to flush toilets; if only they had dry toilets they would be able to use the water, collected with much effort, in better ways. The other teachers chimed in, agreeing that they had been waiting on this promise for years, but the state had never delivered.

César listened, a little uncomfortably, to their praise for his generosity, which they contrasted to the fact that they had been “forgotten” by the state. After they finished, it was César’s turn. He said, “With the cistern you will have your own water. You won’t need the water of the state. I have been doing this for twenty five years, and it works.” He went on to explain that the cistern is strong because of its shape, “round and strong like an egg or like our craniums” unlike the more common square cisterns, which break easily and of which there was an abandoned one in the schoolyard. The shell of round cisterns itself is thin, but because of its form you cannot easily break it. It also requires fewer materials to build. The square cisterns, conversely, eventually crack because the corners are points of weakness. For César, it is important that his designs reflect forms found in nature. When the water enters the cistern, it doesn’t hit against the corners; it flows smoothly around the rounded edges.

As César explained his work to the audience of teachers, Tonio came down to the soccer field. He interrupted César to say a little bit about ATM. “We have no financial interests, political interests, or religious motivations,” he said. “The only thing we ask is that the community pay with their labor.” The teachers nodded their heads in understanding and approval of the terms of relationship demanded by ATM.
In stating that they have no political, economic, or religious interests, Tonio characterized the organization as apolitical, defining it against the corporatist model for which the Mexican government is so well known. Development projects in Mexico often come with a political price tag—the vote. While ATM had no real interest in this kind of political payback, I would characterize their work as having another kind of political interest. ATM plays a part, however small, in defining and constructing a sense of national identity. Through their organizational mission, which is aptly reflected in their title, ATM inadvertently reinforces colonial hierarchies, a particular idea of progress and productivity, and (influenced by their immersion in the rapidly proliferating global NGO culture) the preference for quantifiable “results.” And that is part of the difficulty in this kind of critique; it is precisely because the concept of “development” appears so benign and apolitical that it is so dangerous.

Being a part of the modern nation state also means to be deserving of services (state education, infrastructure projects, roads, piped water, etc). A small indigenous village like Comachuén can be seen as “ignored” by the state, “lacking” in these basic services. To acknowledge that the people of Comachuén “are Mexican, too” is to acknowledge their right to be recognized as part of the nation, and implicit in this recognition is an acceptance of the historical clientelistic relationship, a relationship Illich, Escobar, and Esteva, among others, would view as explicitly disenabling, stripping these communities of their native ability to provide for themselves. Beyond clientelism, to construct national identity in this way is part and parcel of the process of assimilation and the economization of daily living.
ATM makes the point that they do not give hand-outs, that they have a help for self-help approach. They require the participation of all of the beneficiaries in the community. This approach in development projects, emphasizing “popular participation,” has been criticized as “another sociological tool in populist or technocratic repertoire of ideological and political manipulation” (Esteva, 1998, p283). By co-opting the demand for participation, developers are able to lend legitimacy to their work. “The ‘incorporation’ and ‘access’ sought through ‘popular participation’ were completed for a minority,” and thus for the excluded majority the approach of popular participation “created unbearable addictions—dependency without access—to the increasingly centralized services that were redefining people’s needs” (Illich, 1978). This was apparent to me in the way people expressed need for more education and more services, as if only then would there exist the possibility of improving their lot.

A few of my evening reflections

I keep coming back to the teachers at the school—the state finally funded flush toilets in the school. The director said they were reserved for the girls, so they could “have a little dignity.” Now if only they had water to flush them. The state promised them a water line, but they never delivered...

I was asked three times this afternoon if I knew someone’s father, brother, son working in Pennsylvania, Los Angeles, Chicago. Rosa gave me her husband’s phone number in North Carolina, and took mine to give to him. He left a month after they were married. He has been gone three years now. We are both twenty-two...

Esperanza, one of the workshop attendees, came to me this afternoon. She tells me, “It would have been better if we were educated. If the girls had gone to school, too.”
She asked Amanda if she knew anyone in DF that could help pay for her granddaughter’s education...

ATM serves as a kind of intermediary between citizens, the state, and the “experts.” It is federally funded and thus serves as an arm of the state, making-up where the state’s presence is lacking, which has come to be the role of so many NGOs, to fill the vacuum where the state fails to serve its citizens. It does so by acknowledging and reinforcing the “Mexican-ness” of their beneficiaries and by “helping” to bring them into the economic fold, nurturing those unbearable addictions to which Illich referred. But in the project in Comachuén, ATM got an “expert” they didn’t bargain for, one who promoted self-reliance, rather than dependency. César did not allow the ATM members to put him on that “expert” pedestal, despite their continued efforts.

The inner walls

Build a small stone wall around the circumference of the hole (about 35cm x 40cm). Make sure to leave a space for the pipe where the water from the roof will enter. Mix cement (cement, gravel, sand and water). Lower into the hole by the bucket full. Use a trowel to throw the cement at the walls until you have a ½ inch layer all around.
Yesterday, Amanda, the regional coordinator for ATM, had been preoccupied throughout the morning, worried that they did not have sufficient time to gather everyone before César gave a *plática*, a talk of exhortation explaining his motives and methods. She had also been concerned with finding a venue and had been asking around to see if we could use the health clinic or a classroom in the school for the talk. But this wasn’t how César worked. In a few minutes, in the impromptu meeting on the soccer field, he had given his “*plática*.” This preoccupation with formalities and with maintaining a sense of order would shape much of Amanda’s work of coordination during the week-long workshop and would be, for her, the source of much frustration.

At the other site, the *Centro de Salud*, the Health Center, the excavation was half complete at about a meter deep. Here again César gave his “*plática*” to a mostly female audience of workshop attendees while Lupe, the tallest and broadest of the women, shawl tied around her waist, with her baseball cap on, translated to P’urhépecha to make sure everyone was on the same page.

“I’m only staying for a day. Ramiro will stay until it’s finished,” César said referring to the cistern. “He knows how to build them better than I do,” he added with not a hint of jest in his voice. The first night we spent in the hotel in Nahuatzen, about fifteen minutes from Comachuén, Ana said to me, “That’s what I love about César. Most architects are so arrogant. They have to supervise everything. César has confidence in Ramiro. And he should. He *knows*.” I immediately thought of the distinction Illich makes between education and learning. César may be a certified
architect, but Ramiro has been working as an albañil for fifteen years, and César respects this.

As he had announced to the communities, César left early the next morning, and we were asked by Amanda to reconvene at exactly nine in the morning, en punto. Amanda and Tonio, along with Ramiro, Ana, and I went to the local hardware shop in Nahautzen to order more materials since we had decided to expand the second cistern, and Ramiro had noted the day before that we were lacking a few things. He had no orderly list or set formula, but rather made his calculations on the fly. With his sombrero cocked back towards his ponytail and off to the side, a Marlboro Red dangling from his lip, and a basketball jersey exposing the sides of his bare chest (in contrast, I was wearing a thermal, sweatshirt, jacket, and scarf), he spoke rapidly in an almost unintelligible (to my untrained ear) chilango accent—the accent of people from Mexico City. Today, his constant changes of mind and sometimes vague “guess-timations” were tolerated, as César had firmly put him in charge and the ATM members had but little choice to listen patiently. However, as we returned to the store nearly every morning throughout the week for something or other Ramiro had forgotten to order, Amanda’s patience began to thin, and she became clearly irritated by his lack of organization. I found it amusing to watch him interact in such a blunt manner with the shop owner as I sipped my morning atole, a warm milk and cornmeal drink, leaning against the doorframe, even noticing him slip a codo into his pocket on Wednesday as the shop owner and his brother argued about a short shipment of cement.
Ramiro had a very laid back manner, turning everything into a joke or an opportunity to barter. He was not concerned with rigid schedules or formulas. He calculated everything in his head. He expressed his confidence in his ability to work como el diablo, like the devil, and more than once we ran an extension cord out to the construction site to continue after dark. He worked so quickly that we joked he had four arms. At night he would tell stories of his trips to the United States. He has been three times, mojado, clandestinely crossing the mountainous border near San Diego.

**Reinforcing the inner walls**

Once the cement walls have dried, lower the *malla*, large wire mesh, into the hole and peg tightly against the walls. Apply another layer of cement until the wire mesh is completely covered. Let dry.

In contrast, Amanda appeared obsessed with organizing and supervising everything. If she had seen Ramiro pilfer the *codo*, I imagine she would have had a heart attack or at least made him bring it back. Amanda is a young woman, probably twenty six or twenty seven years old, and was raised in Mexico City and educated in London. She drives a maroon Jeep with leather interior and always matches her
earrings to her outfit. I don’t see her anxiety over meticulously tracking and supervising the project necessarily or only as a reflection on her as a person. I see it, rather, as a by-product of her training and of the environment she works in.

Fröhling, et al. observe, “Few NGO financial connections operate outside of a managerial regime known as accountability” (2005, 1851). As defined by Edwards and Hulme, accountability is “the means by which individuals and organizations report to a recognized authority (or authorities) and are held responsible for their actions” (1996, 967). In development work this structure of “accountability” exists primarily to appease donors’ anxieties about how their money is being spent and to develop evidence that it is being spent appropriately, that it is “making a difference,” a difference that must be, in addition, quantifiable. But in order to ensure a measurable impact, as Fröhling et al. explain, “assessment tools aimed at comparing objectives to outcomes can: overly emphasize quantitatively measurable outcomes; divert NGO resources from actions to analysis; and confuse evaluation outcomes with NGO performance, thereby punishing those organizations that undertake riskier projects” (Fröhling et al. 2005, 1851).

Accountability and transparency are then conveyed in the form of reports in which evidence of change is demonstrated in simple numbers. The overall result is the establishment of a “report culture” (Mawdsley et al. 2000). Participation in this new NGO culture requires “technical and language skills” and comes with a “burdensome level of bureaucratization and culturally disjunctive professionalization (Abransom, 1999; Pitner, 2000; Powell & Seddon, 1997)” (in Fröhling et al 2005, 1851). The report culture dominates nonprofit work to such a point, for example, that
Amanda felt that she often spent more time in the office writing reports for donors than she did “in the field.”

The differences between the construct in which Amanda was working, with the emphasis placed on the quantifiable, and the quotidian reality in Comachuén caused some conflict between the organization and the project participants. The first day, when everyone went home for lunch they did not return for several hours. Amanda, frustrated by the loss of time, suggested ATM secure sandwiches so the participants would stay for lunch, and we could then limit the lunch break to half an hour. When Amanda asked the group to bring ten pesos each, about seventy-five cents at the time, to cover the cost of the tortas, it caused a considerable amount of tension. It became clear that the women of Comachuén had other ideas about what could or should be quantified or commodified. Within the largely non-monetized local economy the participants were not accustomed to paying for food.

A few of the women pulled me aside. Rosa stated emphatically, “Here a whole family can eat well for ten pesos.” Lupe chimed in, “We eat from our milpa. You take what maíz you have to be ground at the mill, bring home the masa, the dough, and make your tortillas like this,” she illustrated by clapping her hands back and forth. “You can buy five or six chiles for a peso, and boil a few vegetables from the yard.” “Cash is for things like shoes,” Rosa added, and “with ten pesos I could buy a new pair of sandals.” I remembered a conversation she and I had earlier that day about the handkerchief she was embroidering while we were waiting for the cement to dry. The handkerchiefs usually fetch two pesos, or fifteen cents, at the
market. In light of the hours of labor it takes to stitch the intricate flowered patterns, ten pesos for a sandwich suddenly seemed absurd. Other arrangements were made.

As Gustavo and Madhu, another friend of César’s, elaborate in “Mas allá del desarrollo, ¿Como?” “Beyond Development, What?” the people on the economic margins “do not fit well into any of the designs of planners or developers; they are constantly trespassing the boundaries of economic territory to escape from its rules” (Esteva and Prakash 1998, 282). In this sense, the workshop attendees in Comachuén do not fit neatly into Amanda’s designs. They do not keep an industrial nine to five schedule with a limited lunch break, nor do they typically exchange money for food. I saw her resulting frustration as a product of cultural incongruence between life at Comachuén and the project’s management needs and efficiency demands.

Fröhling, et al. bring these tension to light in observing that “by not recognizing alternative organizational style, NGOs and donors may miss opportunities to synergistically build effective programs upon culturally congruent frameworks… In some NGOs the sort of hierarchical structure assumed by much managerialism is at odds with the NGO’s deliberate attempts to operate through a more horizontal, fluid, or democratic organizational structure” (Fröhling 2005, 9). The emphasis placed on “accountability” and standardized managerial practices, often stemming from the corporate world, means that in the development industry people like Amanda are easily replaceable. Her work must be intelligible (read: quantifiable) to the institution as well as their donors. In this way her “worth” to the organization can also be measured. This kind of replace-ability also necessitates a certain reduction and abstraction on her part. She must be able to communicate (and ultimately to sell)
the work she is doing to people who have never heard of Comachuén, maybe who
have never been to Mexico.

In contrast, César is operating under a very different set of principles. He
deliberately refuses to seek out funding from donor organizations or the state. He
makes this choice in order to free himself from the requirements these funding
sources impose. The only conditions under which he will accept outside funding is in
the case of short term grants, intended for a specific project, and only when they are
offered to him without rigid obligations. He sustains his organization through his
architectural design work and by selling molds and toilets to those who prefer to buy
rather than build. This is necessary “for my work to be economically self-sustaining,”
he tells me. “That is autonomy.”

**The floor**

Cut a circle of *malla* the size of
the floor and peg to the *malla*
on the walls where the walls
meet the floor. Leave a bucket
size hole in one corner. When
there is very little water in the
cistern it will all flow to that one
corner. Lay cement over the wire
mesh.

About half way through the week Amanda asked me to look over a census
questionnaire she was designing to identify the next round of ATM “beneficiaries.”
She hoped to cover 100 community members in a week. I gulped when I saw it. It
was two single-spaced pages, jam-packed with questions, with a sleek layout and the
ATM logo in the upper right hand corner. First, the sheer volume of questions was very ambitious. I told her I thought it would take two hours at least at each house where she had estimated to spend just twenty minutes. As I read over the questions I couldn’t help but wonder how people would be able to offer answers? And how would this massive amount of data be helpful to ATM? These were my initial reactions to some of the questions as I read over the questionnaire:

Question: House’s roof size in square meters? Shape? Material?

*Most community members couldn’t write, let alone calculate the size of their roof in square meters. Most roofs were a compilation of whatever material was available, laminate here, thatch there, aluminum on the other side. What would she or anyone else be able to infer from this?*

Question: Flush toilet? Latrine?

*In my brief stay I hadn’t encountered many latrines. It had been expressed to me that most people just go off into the woods.*

Question: Monthly cost of water? Monthly cost from each source (bottled, well, piped, truck)? Number of liters purchased weekly?

*This depends on the week and on whether it’s available or not. If you have money that week to purchase water at all, the prices definitely change between the rainy and dry seasons. And as far as the quantity goes, people don’t think in liters; they measure in buckets or barrels. How are people supposed to come up with a set number for this?*
Question: Number of hours spent weekly in acquiring water?

*Again, is it the rainy season or the dry season? Is there a long line at the public well today? Are you doing laundry that day? This matters because that’s an all day endeavor.*

Question: How many members of the household share how many liters weekly?

*Is everyone home for the whole week? Do men leave to work in the city for a few days and then return? What about the animals in the house; a horse consumes five to ten times as much water as a person.*

I cite these examples only to shed light on some of the contradictions of attempting to apply a survey instrument such as the one Amanda was designing, especially when keeping in mind the differing notions of time and money. Amanda needs the census for accountability, in order to identify “appropriate beneficiaries,” those most in need of their services, to prove to their funding sources that ATM’s work is worthwhile. However, it is nearly impossible to capture the reality of the situation, unless it is in the reductionist manner of averages. Amanda needs numbers, and numbers necessitate reduction and abstraction. In the abstraction, the people and the place, the substance of the interactions, the intangible benefits, and the contingencies of decisions are lost; just as the “little César” in chapter one is lost in the process of measuring his “development.” These numbers will be averages at best, and her interviewees may very well laugh when she leaves and wonder why this skinny light-skinned lady asks such funny questions. But if she tried to “identify beneficiaries” based on intangibles such as personal interactions and observations it
would be her donors laughing at her. She is stuck in a place that necessitates a
difficult translation from the world of the sleepy pueblo to the desk of the government
bureaucrat.

However, these questions can and often are answered by development
organizations. I qualify this type of work as reductionist in reference to the culturally
situated western scientific model. As Majid Rahnema writes in the chapter,
“Poverty,” in the Dictionary, “To sum up, the whole exercise of needs assessment is
justified on the ground that it provides the planners with a ‘scientific’ basis for their
anti-poverty planning. In practice, it is often an irrelevant exercise” (1992, 166).
Rahnema goes on to state, “After separating the poor person’s ‘needs’ from him as an
active and living human being, it reduces him to only an inadequate ingredient of
economic growth” (1992, 166). In the reduction of human beings to the sum of their
economic actions, the project of “needs assessment” dehumanizes otherwise
culturally complex actors and dehistoricizes “poverty.”

When I told César about the census and my frustrations with its shortcomings,
but also about my recognition of its necessity in the development world, this was his
response: “She needs that census because she needs pobres (poor people) in order for
her job to ser necesario (be necessary).” In his interpretation, the reduction of
people’s lived experiences to numbers in a census is a way of classifying them as
poor and of proving they are in need of their services. Without proof of a “needy”
population, the work of ATM becomes irrelevant. If an NGO succeeds in fulfilling its
stated mission, it ceases to be necessary. Therefore, paradoxically, in order to be
considered “sustainable” they must constantly reaffirm their necessity (Fröhling et al.
2005, 9), in this case by proving the “needy-ness” of their future “beneficiaries.” This paradox, taken into consideration with the cultural incongruence cited above, highlights “the many tensions contained within and spilling out from the circulation of managerialism in NGO networks,” which “bespeak[s] its deeply contradictory and political nature” (Fröhling et al. 2005, 15).

Making the egg shape

Round out the corners with cement where the wall meets the floor, so you have a bowl shape instead of hard right angles. Let dry.

Driving back from Comachuén to Nahuatzen with Amanda, along the only windy road down from the forested mountains that stand guard around the pueblo, I asked her what she was trying to get at with the census. Here I reconstruct her reply:

“We are trying to calculate the resources, time and money, spent each day to fulfill basic needs, like the time spent fetching water when they could be engaging in productive activities. In the organization they are referred to as horas perdidas.”
I was struck by this concept of *horas perdidas*—lost hours. In this moment it became clear to me that while the work of ATM was not explicitly designed to incorporate the community into the economic sphere, their efforts were entirely framed within the logic of the community’s future incorporation. Those quotidian tasks, like bringing water from the well, which had so long been an inextricable aspect of the art of living, were in the context of the “modern” economy of urban Mexico a waste of time, “unproductive activities.” They had to be “modernized,” so as to free people up to become “productive” members of a capitalist nation state. I am reminded of the organization’s telling title, “Help me, as I too am Mexican.” As Gronemeyer describes, helping is a “transformative intervention” which “transforms all self-sufficient, subsistence forms of existence by introducing them to progress” (1992, 66).

As we are rounding the last bend in the road toward the city, I could see the local PEMEX glowing green in the foggy distance, one of those ubiquitous markers of modernity. Amanda turns to me, “It’s about expanding their choices, to be able to go to school, to have a job.”

**The top**

Lay your viguetas across the length of the cistern 70 cm apart (the width of the bovedilla). They should rest firmly on the stone wall. Place the bovedillas between the viguetas to form a solid wall for the top of the cistern. Leave a round hole for the mold for the hatch and a smaller hole for the PVC pipe where the hand pump will go.
Global poverty is an entirely modern construct. The ATM “beneficiaries” weren’t “poor” until someone told them they were. “The basic materials” writes Rahnema, “which have gone into the construct are essentially the economization of life and the forceful integration of vernacular societies into the world economy” (1992, 161). Until sixty years ago poverty was generally a relative, culturally defined category, contingent upon the perception of one’s social standing and the self-definition and assessment of ends relative to one’s means.

In one of its 1948 reports the World Bank “closely correlates the problem of global poverty with countries’ gross national products” (Rahnema 1992, 161). It thereafter became the responsibility of the “rich” countries to help the “poor” through the encouragement of economic development. “Thus, for the first time in history, entire nations and countries came to be considered (and consider themselves) as poor, on the grounds that their overall income is insignificant in comparison with those now dominating the world economy” (1992, 161).

Just as managerialism in NGO culture can inadvertently cause organizations to impose westernized notions of time and promote the economization of life and limit their ability to design effective, cultural congruent programs; the modern, economic construction of poverty “overshadowed the exploration of such deeper and more sensitive issues as the processes of political and cultural domination, the pervasive role of institutions, and the very nature of the industrial production system” (Rahnema 1992, 162). Instead of questioning the unintended impacts her work may
be having, Amanda, through her emphasis on “productive hours,” seemed to believe in “the new economic myth that poverty could be conquered through increased productivity” (Rahnema 1992,163).

When I explained the concept of horas perdidas to César he came the closest to scoffing I have ever seen him. Then he laughed, that mischievous kind of laughter, as if he knew something the people at ATM didn’t. “Those are not lost hours,” he said. “I would prefer fetching water to engaging in ‘productive’ activities any day.”

The point is that how you define “lost hours” is contingent upon your definition of “the good life,” and development assumes that a particular lifestyle is or should be desirable by all. For Gustavo, “dignity” is being able to define “the good life” for yourself, to be able to practice the “art of living and dying” on your own terms. In juxtaposition with the homogenizing category of “poverty” as defined by a lack of economic resources, Gustavo would often refer to the poverty of industrialized nations, where he saw a poverty of ideas, of the environment, of happiness, and of community.

**Mold for the hatch**

Place the tire-shaped mold between two viguetas and secure with two wooden planks and wire. The smaller mold goes inside the larger one, leave a three inch gap. Fill the gap with cement to make small wall, the edge of the hatch. Without it you won’t be able to get any water out, so don’t forget!
One of ATM’s main projects is Machihembloquee, or “matching block.” A type of “sustainable” technology for constructing homes, the “matching blocks” in question are modified adobe bricks—part adobe, part Ferro cement—which resemble Legos parts in that they are designed like puzzle pieces to fit together. The technology is considered “sustainable” in that it employs natural materials like adobe, but also “improved” because of the addition of Ferro cement. The blocks are prefabricated in Mexico City and the “beneficiaries,” identified as the “most needy” in the communities where ATM works, are given the materials to construct their homes in exchange for their labor in the construction process.

César succinctly expressed his concern with Machihembloquee technology thus: “Why would you rely on a machine when the millennia-old culture of adobe already exists?” Matching block technology is disenabling in that the users become dependent on a machine operated by someone else somewhere else to produce building materials they once would have been able to produce themselves. It is through innovations like Machihembloquee technology that the knowledge of truly sustainable technology such as adobe making is lost to future generations. The people “benefiting” from the technology become dependent upon “experts” who control the means of production, “further diminishing their capacity to meet their real needs which they used to do in the context of their vernacular livelihood” (Rahnema 1992, 166). In building with unadulterated adobe the builder is then solely reliant upon his or her human energy. In a convivial society people derive joy from the ability to craft
their personal environment, a very different experience from being the passive receiver of Machihembloquee, shipped out to you from the city, to then be assembled under “expert” instruction.

The “sustainable development” of the brand promoted by ATM has often been used to distract from the unaccounted-for impacts and destructive nature of the development project. After the 1980s “Lost Decade of Development” the Dictionary proclaimed development to be dead, its devastating underside revealed. However, beginning in the 1990s “re-development now donned the latest, designer-made, green mantle of ecological fix-its” (Esteva 1998, 284). This kind of green-washing has become fashionable on a global scale, a green facelift for the unbearable environmental impacts of economic development, but the basic goals remain the same, the assimilation of the worlds “under-developed” population into the neoliberal world economy.

**Reinforcing the top**

Cover the top you’ve made of bovedillas (supported by viguetas) with another circle of wire mesh. Cover in a layer of cement until you cannot see the mesh anymore. Let dry.
The primary difference between César’s work and a “sustainable” technology such as Machihembrilée is that César explicitly fosters autonomy. He expressly views himself as a facilitator, bringing together people and providing them with knowledge and tools so that they may walk away having gained enough experience to reproduce the technology themselves.

In his mini-plática on the first day César emphasized that if participants pay close attention and if they learned the process well enough they would never be without chamba, the Mexican word for informal work. “As long as there is a need for water you will have work, and there is always a need for water, sí?” César had brought a short guide to building cisterns, written in Spanish and Nauhtl that he distributed to all who were interested, as well as a story called “The Gift of Water” about his childhood and how he came to respect water. In his humble way he was creating the space for those interested to step up and organize themselves.

ATM was interested in producing a short film for promotional purposes, and Amanda voiced this desire to César. Uncomfortable with the idea of being filmed for donors, and taking into account the oral culture of P’urhépecha speakers, he recommended that the video instead be shot as an instructional video. Each step of the way the participants could explain in both Spanish and P’urhépecha the work that they were doing so other P’urhépecha speakers would be able to follow the process regardless of fluency in Spanish or the ability to read a manual. In this way César was working to take advantage of participants’ strengths, namely their oral tradition, to
make the possibility of reproducing the technology even more accessible. He was not concerned with what many project participants lack (the ability to read and write in Spanish, as a manual would require), or with advertising to donors; instead, he concentrates on pre-existing community assets. He also explicitly avoids creating a dependency relationship in which he, the “expert” controls access to the means of production and the knowledge, but rather encourages all to become “experts” in their own right.

The filter

The filter is made of brick, with three compartments. In the first and second the leaves and sediment from the roof settle to the bottom while the clean water at the top flows over the wall to the next chamber. In the third compartment, gravel and a wire mesh remove the finer sediments. At the bottom there are cleaning tubes to wash out the gunk from the roof.

In my critique of ATM I do not intend to minimize the agency of those involved in the project of assimilation or the validity of the desire for incorporation among recipients of development. The “goodies” of development, so to speak, become increasingly desirable as the “old” way of life becomes more difficult to sustain due to environmental degradation or social pressure to “modernize.” I do not mean to suggest that I know what people “should” or “should not” desire, only to note
that often these desires and “unbearable addictions,” as Illich calls them, are explicitly and implicitly shaped by the promises of development.

Gustavo and Prakash write, “The margins are reinserted into the economic family as the category of those ‘who-are-not-yet-but-will-become’,” (1998). This is the premise of ATM, that the communities they have identified have not yet been given the opportunity to devote their time and existence to “productive” activities, but with the help of the organization they can. If only ATM can improve their “quality of life” through improved housing and access to water, they will reach a point that will allow them to enter the world of the market. This is not say that improved housing and access to clean water are not desirable ends in themselves, but rather that we must question the means by which these ends are being pursued and to examine the ideological consequences.

In this narrative, ATM has played a complex role. In certain respects they are entangled in the globalization of managerialism to which Fröhling et al. refer. They are also “helping” their “beneficiaries” to be able to dedicate themselves to “productive activities,” a goal that I view as deeply embedded in the development mindset. In this case their encounter with César was a chance one; he was recommended by an environmentalist friend of the organization. As they had never met or worked together before, and I do not believe they anticipated his style of working. On the one hand Amanda and Tonio can be critical of capitalism and the state, yet they do not question the ideas of development, national identity or poverty upon which their work seems to be based. In asking the participants to pay with their labor and, at least superficially, encouraging “popular participation” their work is
framed in terms of “help for self-help,” which by incorporating and co-opting participants in the process really only questions the “hand-out” side of development and not development itself.

**The hatch and the hand pump**

To make the mold the hand pump will stand on, put the pieces together as shown. Then pour cement between the cardboard and the PVC. The wire mesh serves to reinforce it.

Remove the mold carefully. Cover the hatch with a round metal lid on hinges. From here you can drop a bucket attached to rope to fetch water. Feed your tubing for the hand pump through the PVC into the cistern, it should be long enough to reach the bottom. Remove the cardboard mold and attach your hand pump to the tubing. Wait for it to rain. Pump!
To an extent, I see the work of ATM work as an effort to remedy the failures of neoliberalism and development. “Help for self-help”, however, still does not reject the idea that the entire world is in need of development; that it must join the industrial way of life (Gronemeyer 1992, 66). César, though, is doing something entirely different. Rather than work to clean up the mess left in the wake of capitalist expansion, he is working to build something new. Through the use and cultivation of convivial tools he is contributing to the “New Commons.”

On the last day, over a somewhat ceremonial lunch the mothers of the schoolchildren had prepared for ATM and the participants, Amanda announced that they would provide the materials for future cisterns if the participants would provide the labor. Lupe commented, “The only way to do it is if we make work teams, then the work will go quickly.” Before I left, she, Rosa, and Esperanza began to plan for the construction of their own cisterns, light-heartedly disputing whose would be built first.
EPILOGUE

Development was a world social experiment that had failed miserably in the experience of the world’s majority whose ‘incorporation’ into the world market or the educational system, on equal and fair conditions, looked increasingly unfeasible. The gap between the center and the margins was constantly widening (Esteva and Prakash 1998, 283).

A couple weeks ago, a fellow IHP student, aware of my affinity for flush-less toilets, sent me a link to a New York Times video about two American women working on ecological sanitation in Haiti. Reluctant to take a break from thesis writing, but curious about their work, I uploaded the video and watched it. I recognize those toilets! The dry composting toilets the women were building in Haiti were César’s design. In the video there was no mention of the origins of the toilet, and so I quickly wrote an email to the organization asking how they came across this particular model. Sure enough, they had sent an intern to Mexico in 2006 to acquire the molds for the cement toilets. They had begun public bathroom projects in the city of Cap Haitien and were building in the countryside as well, establishing small appropriate technology centers as they expanded.

This was a sign that this technology is spreading, making news even in the mainstream U.S. media, more than likely unbeknownst to its creator, who without promoting or subjecting himself to the requirements of large donor organizations, often goes unaccredited. I’m not sure he would care very much, as he does not like to be in the spotlight. It is not only the spread of the technology itself that is encouraging
to me, but of the potential politicization these technologies are meant to bring about, at least the rethinking of water management by its users that is so important. Seeing César’s designs on the New York Times website drove home for me the relevance of this project outside of intellectual thought, beyond this thesis and the world of ideas. While these technologies are the concrete manifestation of a school of thought, one of the tools for convivial society, watching this video I saw the congruency between theory and practice, and it became evident to me that these ideas are completed when they are applied.

The video was both inspiring as a testimony to the pertinence of César’s work outside of Mexico as well as evidence of the continuing need to trouble the development discourse. While development may have failed to incorporate the world’s majority into the world market, “development speak” continues to overshadow issues of cultural and political domination. Even as he brought ecological sanitation to light for mainstream audiences, the journalist, Nicholas Kristof, who authored the NYT video, continued to talk about “developing these poor countries’ economies” and was concerned with the viability of “scaling it up.” He concluded the video by saying, “I can’t be sure that this technology will make economic sense, but I love the idea that even at a time when America’s own needs are so immense a couple of young crazy Americans are out here dedicking themselves to helping others whose distress is so much greater than our own (emphases mine)” (Kristof 2009).

Against the “sense” of development, the promotion of radical technologies like the compost toilet appear “crazy” to Kristof. This is an excellent example of how development discourse today is no longer a particular approach to dealing with
modern poverty but has become common sense. The idea of development has been uprooted of its historical and cultural origins, and it has become the norm to distinguish countries as either “developed” or “developing.” Entirely couched in the language of “helping” others along the path towards progress, which is supposedly attainable through economic development and “scaling it up,” the journalist’s depiction of what I view as a radically different technology, diverges little from the dominant discourse and therefore misses the point. In this thesis, I have attempted to re-historicize the conversation. César’s work is not intended to be just another stop on the super-highway to “development”. He and all those who care to venture with him are stepping away from that path and forging their own. They are creating a new water commons. His technologies not only ask us to rethink and reshape our lifestyles, but to define for ourselves what it means to be autonomous.

In addition to unearthing the historical roots of development, the project that led me to the writing of this thesis was also a personal journey, one that led me to rethink my own relationship to water. This journey began in César’s backyard, by mixing cement and filling toilet molds; it was cultivated by poignant pond-side conversations while waiting for them to dry; and sustained by the satisfaction of hammering the shell open to find your own little slice of sovereignty. To begin with something as modest as a dry toilet, to separate shit and state, was the first step in discovering a whole worldview linking theory and practice in a radical critique of development, one that lays bare the historical and political nature of the paradigm.

In accepting the absurdity of the flush toilet, I was compelled to reconceptualize what I previously thought of as “waste” and was pushed to expand
my own comfort levels in handling it. It was this personal reevaluation that led me to question the practices of large institutions that I previously trusted to care for my local waterways and to manage my waste. If I, one individual, can manage both “waste” and water on a local scale in a way that makes sense both socially and environmentally, why can’t the “experts” do it, too? This however would necessitate a far-reaching reevaluation of not only institutionalized and industrialized water management, but of an entire way of being in the world. The ecological sanitation movement is not, as Kristof would have it, for “helping poor countries develop their economies.” It is about regenerating the commons outside of and contrary to the logic of the market. To deliberately disengage from the grid is both a humbling and emboldening step towards water sovereignty.

I was drawn to César’s project because it was so radically different from anything I had ever known. This one simple thing, a toilet without water, caused me to question all of my assumptions about politics, development, social change, and wisdom. What continues to draw me to it is the possibility of opening up new pathways of learning and living in this world. Gustavo writes, “We are … healing ourselves from the damages done to us by colonization and development. Together, we are all joyfully walking again along our own path, trusting again our own noses, dreaming again our own dreams…” (2004). I have arrived at the end of this process with a few good answers about how to deal with the colonizing dimension of development discourse and with many more questions, ideas for new paths to embark upon, and the hope that this dialogue will continue.
César depends on word of mouth for the spread of information about his technologies and his understanding of our relationship to the world around us. *Boca a boca*, literally mouth to mouth, these ideas are moving through the grassroots everywhere. Above all, on this journey I have learned to imagine new worlds. Not everyone in them has to have a dry toilet, though that would be nice, but in these new worlds there exists the space in the social and political landscape to build a new commons. In them, needs are self-defined, learning is self-initiated, and social interactions are at the center of life. In this spirit, I invite you to share, reproduce, and use this story in any way.

Gustavo asks, “Can we really change again the subject of history? Can we create new, contemporary commons?” (2004).

At the grassroots the seeds of the new commons have begun to germinate.
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