THE NEED FOR A COMMON ROOF
(THE SOCIAL CONTROL OF TECHNOLOGY)*

By Valentina Borremans and Ivan Illich

Translation by Gustavo Esteva and Rebecca Gamez

The social control of the systems of production is the basis for any social restructuring: the new phase in which technology has entered allows and demands a new determination of such control. 1) The social ownership of the means of production; 2) The social control of the mechanisms of distribution, and 3) the community agreement on the self-limitation of some technological dimensions, but only taken together do they constitute the basis for the social control of production in a society.

In the early phases of industrialization, the first two aspects seemed so important that they did not allow thinking on the third to develop sufficiently. In our opinion, what is needed today is political control of the technological characteristics of industrial products and of the intensity of professional services.

This new politics consists of the search for community agreement on the technological profile of a common roof under which all the members of a society want to live, rather than in the construction of a launchpad from which only a few members of that society are sent to the stars.

This new politics is a voluntary and communitarian self-limitation, the search to maximize institutional productivity and the consumption of goods and services limited by the needs considered to be satisfactory for each individual within that community.

The social control of the mode of production acquires a wider meaning in the current era of technological development. In the first phases of industrialization, for good reason, attention had to concentrate on the ownership of the means of production and on the equitable distribution of products.

In the phase that we have experienced since the sixties, the most important political goal should be the social definition of a maximum in relation to some basic characteristics of the products of a society.

The economic elites of Latin American societies have already incorporated in their world vision what we will call the "technological imperative." We call "technological imperative" the idea that if any technological achievement is possible anywhere in the world, it should be realized and put in the service of some men no matter the price that other members of the society must pay for it.

Capitalist societies justify planning under the "technological imperative" slogan by the apparent demand of a few consumers who want to move at supersonic speeds. Socialist societies justify this same planning by the supposed service to the entire community derived from the possibility that a few could move at such a velocity.

Any society that accepts the "technological imperative" will place the quality and quantity of goods and services produced in service of indefinite progress, thereby destroying the base in order to achieve the construction of socialism.

This inevitably leads to the control of society by "expert technocrats" (professionals, specialists, scientists, etc.) regardless of the fact that they have been selected to serve the powerful by a political party or by a group of capitalists.

We consider Crypto-Stalinism to reside precisely in this: in appropriating social control of the means of production to justify centralized control over the distribution of goods, in the service of the unlimited increase in production.

We believe that at this moment conditions exist to mobilize the majority of some Latin American and African peoples to consciously reject domination by technocrats, an inevitable consequence of the popular acceptance of the "technological imperative." Once people have accepted (it does not matter to what degree) that it is worth the trouble to send a man to the moon, or keep someone alive for more than hundred years, or to take trips at supersonic speeds, they will easily accept any other form of exploitation, because the idol in whose name the exploitation takes place has been created by a scientist.

The rejection of the "technological imperative" is the basis to initiate the search for the technological dimensions that would have to be subject to popular judgment so that the majority determines the maximum limits under which it wants to live.

For example:

What is the maximum speed limit for the transport of people that allows the optimum use of public resources to guarantee optimum mobility to the largest majority?

What maximum amplitude of the electronic spectrum used for communication between people guarantees the optimum level of communication among those of the majority?

How much public resources must be used to prolong the life of an adult, when such expenses discriminate against the great majority that require health prevention and maintenance or assistance in moments of acute crisis?

What possible pedagogical methods must be rejected in favor of the majority's access to the means of self-formation and self-knowledge?

The idea that a people democratically decides the technological dimensions within which it voluntarily limits itself to live, within a certain sphere, and not only provisionally but rather in the long term, is profoundly contrary to the

way of thinking that prevails today.

It is improbable that the initiative to put this problem forward will be taken up in Western or Eastern European countries that find themselves well on the road to industrialization.

In super-capitalist countries where environmental pollution makes the Earth incapable of sustaining human life and the super-determination of the individual makes them impotent to survive outside an artificial environment, a small minority is already conscious of the need to urgently think about limiting production.

We believe that the leadership of a global movement towards a new popular politics in which the people, above all, decide the maximum limits in which that society should live, and then make them accessible to all, should come from some countries of Latin America, Africa, and possibly China.