

# Educing Ivan Illich by John Baldacchino

Review by Dennis Atkinson †

John Baldacchino has produced a book of depth and perspicacity, a book that thinks and writes with the work of Ivan Illich. *Educing Ivan Illich: Reform, Contingency and Disestablishment*, provides a sophisticated, sympathetic and innovative interrogation of the work and social concerns that run through Illich's opus. Baldacchino's text is lucid, scholarly and provocative. There is a spirit of raw honesty to confront the hubris and failings of current 'schooled' societies. Supporting Illich's call for 'research on education' in relation to education's relations with wider socio-political and ethical issues, Baldacchino shows how Illich "*exits* education from its spherical self and floats it into an infinite universe of vernaculars (p.100)." In doing so education faces what William James called a multiverse or what others have called a pluriverse and a world of contingency, with the requirement to develop and evolve convivial assemblages.

Baldacchino's exposition works with a number of key concepts deployed by Illich but his inquiry illustrates these with a lucidity that expands them to provide current educational enquiry and practice with a reaffirmation but also novel interpretations and applications of Illich's work. The book contains critical analyses of the institutionalising of education as a schooled process and how society itself has become a schooled assemblage. Baldacchino revisits Kant's critique as well as the work of Mill, Marx, Engels, Dewey, Greene and others who, in their respective epochs argued against the dulling of the capacity to 'learn' by the institutional formats of education.

The early chapters of *Educing Ivan Illich* deal with an evaluation of the latter's publications and the themes of immanence and utopia whilst chapters 4-8 concern the processes of tradition, learning, reform, contingency and disestablishment. They articulate the notion of deschooling not as a rejection of schools or education, but of its institutionalization and its consequent pedagogizing force; the creation and perpetuation of selected pedagogic identities, driven in current epochs by capitalist competition, exploitation and individualism. The production of human capital whereby those practices and human subjects deemed to be 'irrelevant to the economy' (p.58) can be discarded.

My take on Baldacchino's thinking with Illich is that we are encouraged to view Illich's approach to deschooling, conviviality, learning, contingency and disestablishment less in terms of a *project* but more in terms of a *journey*, always incomplete. It is not a plan, not like a children's 'connect the dots' puzzle whereby the outcome is pre-ordained. It is a continuous becoming-making in which doubt and uncertainty are always nearby to disrupt and derail. It is a journey in which many pathways exist other than those chosen by dominant forces such as capitalism, education, religion, and it is these other obscured pathways that can lead towards other modes of community, value and social existence. Baldacchino refers us to thinkers in different epochs who have challenged the hegemony of established institutions and their identitarian forces including Nicolas Cusano, Hannah Arendt and Gillian Rose, others such as bel hooks, Maxine Greene and Fred Moten come to mind.

This crucial contrast between a project/planning and a journey is brought out towards the end of Baldacchino's book where Illich recalls a seminal moment in conversation with his old teacher and friend, Jacques Maritain. Illich, working in Puerto Rico, was involved with the Government's

manpower qualification planning board and was concerned about the idea of *qualified manpower*. In response to Illich's uneasiness Maritain asks him, "Is not planning, which you talk about, a sin, a new species within the vices which grow out of presumption?" (161). Reflecting on this conversation years later Illich tells us that "in thinking about humans as resources that can be managed, *a new certitude about human nature* would be brought into existence surreptitiously (161)." Baldacchino, following Illich, argues that this sin of planning, its certitude and its objectifying force colonises life which then becomes institutionally managed like any other resource.

Education for Illich and Baldacchino is something like a journey to be made alongside others with all its problems, set-backs, surprises and achievements; a convivial journey in which both perspectives on tradition as well as processes of self-invention inform its journeying. Of course, we can work from plans and projects, from established curricula, from assessment apparatuses, but do these limit and constrain our views and understanding of learning and teaching? In contrast can we develop modes of practice that acknowledge the becoming-making of each learner's and teacher's pathways of learning and teaching? This would demand some radical reconceptions of education and its modes of practice, perhaps of the school and of the university, towards more convivial social assemblages in which learning and teaching are not viewed as projects but as journeys of social and individual invention. This would entail what we might call an education-in-the-making that responds to the autonomy and divergence of practice and what Baldacchino calls the 'gift and grace of contingency' (159). Contingency for Baldacchino is "that by which we gain the freedom in whose gift we have the freedom to buck the trend, act against all odds and conventions and assert that it is possible to move against established necessities (159-160)."

Baldacchino, through Illich, challenges us to reclaim education from its current manifestations and assumptions about teaching and learning. In *educing* Illich Baldacchino draws out the vital relevance and potential of his work for our world today and its uncertain future. This book is not a primer for Illich's work, Baldacchino's interrogation and creative development of key concepts offers a deeply philosophical engagement and analysis that extends and expands Illich's opus. He reviews the philosophical heritage of the key concepts emerging within Illich's books, immanence, utopia, tradition, learning, reform, contingency and disestablishment and then enlarges upon these in relation to our current epoch.

Perhaps the journey of pedagogic practice might be viewed in terms of an evolving dynamic from the gift and grace of contingency, offering opportunities for disestablishment and reform, towards assemblages of conviviality. In the contingency of an encounter how can I think, visualise, act? How can I develop new more effective relations? Such questions, key to Baldacchino's journey, and to pedagogical work, concern aesthetic, political and ethical becoming-making, forms of life yet to emerge, reforming modes of practice in a creative adventure constituted in the dynamic across contingency, disestablishment, reform and conviviality. Reading Baldacchino's text is an opportunity for readers to take on the challenge and make such a journey, to engage with its surprises, potentials, problematising, caring and hope.

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