

Ivan Illich: An Intellectual Journey

by Wolfgang Palaver

David Cayley conducted two long interviews for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation with Ivan Illich (1926–2002), a Catholic priest, social critic, and historian. Both these interviews were also published as books. The first came out in 1992 with the title *In Conversation*, the second in 2005 as [The Rivers North of the Future](#) (reviewed in the May, 2007, *Bulletin*) that Cayley rightly calls Illich's testament. Over those many years Cayley and Illich became friends, and it is due to this friendship that the Canadian journalist and writer has now published a comprehensive book about Illich's intellectual journey. This book not only covers the development of Illich's work and thinking but also shows which thinkers and theories influenced him, and helps us understand some of his asides by connecting them to authors and works that point in a similar direction. All the major stages and topics are very well presented and explained in this volume. This book will be a must for all who want to understand Illich more closely.

Let me refer to some of the most important insights of Illich. First, I mention his critique of institutions that so easily become counterproductive if their limits are not carefully observed. The most outstanding example in this regard can be found in his famous book *Deschooling Society* (1971) that questions compulsory education. Are schools really contributing to learning and the development of one's personality or are they primarily entry tickets into a world of social privileges? Illich frequently illustrates how institutions that are an offspring of good intentions easily cause counterproductive

consequences. Cayley warns his readers, however, not to see in Illich someone who rejects institutions per se but makes them aware how often they fail to achieve their promises. This critique of institutions led Illich to a deeper understanding of modernity that he sees as the perversion of the Christian revelation. He recognized that institutional developments inside the Catholic Church turned into the modern state: “When Gregory VII proclaimed that he alone was ‘permitted to make new laws according to the needs of the times’ and Boniface VIII followed by claiming that law originates ‘in the bosom of the Pope,’ they made themselves the source of a new idea of sovereignty” (380). Illich’s most famous Latin formula *corruptio optimi quae est pessima* [the corruption of the best is the worst] summarizes his recognition of how good intentions can turn out badly. Illich’s most famous biblical example in this regard is the New Testament parable of the Samaritan which shows how ethnic boundaries are overcome by a compassion that no longer limits its outreach according to traditional religious, cultural or ethnic boundaries. In this regard this parable represents the best of the Christian revelation. But it becomes the worst if it turns into a rule that dissolves all home-worlds and undermines local capabilities to help those who are in need. Illich referred also to this parable to explain that its spirit of love cannot be institutionalized without perverting it. The Samaritan acts out of a freedom of love that would be lost if it becomes an institutional obligation. “Freedom institutionalized is something quite different from a resumption of the culturally shaped obligations that the Samaritan has transcended. The Gospel brought under the power of the world is not like anything that has existed before. *Corruptio optimi pessima*” (358).

In view of today’s main challenges Illich’s critical philosophy of technology is most important. For this he turns to

the medieval ages and especially to Hugh of St. Victor—one of his favorite authors—to illuminate the difference between an age of tools and our age of systems. Modernity lost the distance that is necessary to see technologies as means toward ends. Without distance humans become slaves of their own products and are no longer able to set limits to technologies. Illich's turn to Hugh of St. Victor does not mean that he thinks that we can return to the past. His looking back tries to discover roads not taken in order to respond to the challenges of today. His philosophy of technology recommends a Christian *askesis* that he defines as “the acquisition of the habits that foster contemplation” or “conversion to God's human face” (418). Such an *askesis* could provide an attitude that helps to set limits and knows what is enough.

Readers of this *Bulletin* are probably not so much interested in the work of Illich as such but how it relates to Girard's mimetic theory. Cayley is able to show us connections between these two thinkers because he not only interviewed Illich several times but also broadcasted an excellent five-hour interview series with René Girard. Unfortunately, there are only a very few explicit references to Girard in this book on Illich. He sees in Girard a companion of Illich in their recognition that today Christianity is criticized with the help of Christian insights. They also share an interest in the apocalyptic stage of our times and in their interpretation of the Antichrist. There is, however, a close affinity with mimetic theory in Illich's work that is not explicitly mentioned. Illich frequently addressed scarcity as the modern predicament, the “anchoring myth of modernity” (18). Contrary to Marx, Illich views the modern creation of scarcity as the source of alienation and also as the root of our economic and ecological problems. Cayley summarizes the modern myth of scarcity in the following way: “Scarcity, as a postulate, produces plenty

by assuming its opposite. Behind our backs, so to speak, it turns the base metal of envy, desire, and mutual indifference into the gold of abundance and social peace” (186). These promises do not become true. The release of envy does not create harmony but incites competition and resentment. It is not by chance that Illich comes so close to Girard in this regard. He was influenced by *L'enfer des choses*, the book by Paul Dumouchel and Jean-Pierre Dupuy—an early collaborator of Illich—that applied Girard’s mimetic theory to the field of critical economics already in 1979. Illich refers in *Shadow Work* (1980) as well as in *Gender* (1982) to the book of Dumouchel and Dupuy. Both these books document Illich’s wish to write a history of scarcity. Unfortunately, he could not finish this project. One of the reasons for this was the harsh criticism that his book *Gender* received from feminists. Cayley’s book tries to convince his readers that Illich’s reflections were misunderstood. Cayley claims that by writing his book he discovered Illich as a “philosopher of complementarity” (450). Complementarity is also at the center of Illich’s view of gender because he realized that “vernacular cultures”—a term frequently used by Illich—saw women and men complementing each other to contain envy, competition, and resentment. This is in tension, of course, with the modern emphasis on the equality between women and men. Illich, however, is not against equality as such but distinguishes between different types of it depending on their destructiveness:

“Illich speaks loudly against equality as sameness. But he also speaks loudly for equality in its sense of equity, arguing that most women suffer irremediable disadvantages in a realm of universal circulation and competition. The two points are connected. Illich claims that idealizing equality may allow some women to rise to new heights of wealth and influence but that it will hurt many more – by lower-

ing the status of every form of sustenance that occurs outside the cash nexus in which equality finds its measure, by fostering an illusory sense of opportunity, and by inviting those who fail to seize these imaginary opportunities to blame themselves. His analysis of feminism, in this respect, took the same form as his analysis of every other modern institution that he explored—it incites envy and delivers frustration. Only by reversing economic growth, unbuilding the global megalith, and restoring the human scale will the majority of women regain their dignity, he says, because only then will the contribution of those who have been shunted aside in the rat race begin to matter. This is the sole sense in which Illich speaks against equality: equality-as-justice, he says, cannot be achieved without a firm rejection of equality-as-sameness.” (239-240)

Illich's book was rejected in the early 1980s. I am not sure if Cayley will succeed in his attempt to rehabilitate Illich's reflections on gender because the problem is difficult to solve. The traditional submission of women went along with the vernacular complementarity. How can we preserve the advantages of complementarity without a hierarchical relation between men and women? The whole problem finds an interesting parallel in Gandhi's dealing with the Indian caste system. This parallel is not by chance because as Cayley rightly claims there are “many affinities” between Gandhi and Illich (87). Gandhi recognized in the traditional Vedic division of society into four classes (*varnas*) a bulwark against the dangers of envious comparisons. He wanted to avoid “all unworthy competition” and did not identify the *varnas* with the caste system because he strongly insisted on the equality of all human beings: “Assumption of superiority by any person over any other is a sin against God and man. Thus caste, in so far as it connotes distinctions in status, is an evil.” There remains

an ongoing discussion about Gandhi's attempt to support the traditional *varnas* without hierarchical caste relations. Illich's view of gender faces a similar dilemma. It is definitely important to understand the value of vernacular attempts to contain envious competition. Our modern world will definitely benefit from investigating these traditional means against destructive envy. These means, however, are no longer able to solve our own struggles with competition. We have to deal with it in a world of equality that requires new ways to respond to the challenges of mimetic desire.

There is one topic in Illich's work that I find disturbing and that became even more so during the pandemic if we see how the Italian philosopher [Giorgio Agamben](#)—the editor of Illich's works in Italian—and [David Cayley](#) himself reflected on the Covid-19 crisis. Illich was very critical of the modern emphasis on life. The title of the respective chapter in Cayley's book, "To Hell with Life," quotes a provocative thesis by Illich who criticized a modern idolatry of life. Illich was certainly right that "those who hope to gain immortality as cyborgs or who have had themselves cryogenically preserved in anticipation of later medical resurrection" are fetishizing life (327). But can Illich's "theology of death" provide a proper orientation? I strongly doubt it. I see two nearly incompatible claims in Illich's approach to life and death. On the one hand he seems so occupied with death as the giver of "meaning to life" that he sounds like a representative of the sacred of early religions before the biblical religions emphasized the holiness of life (314-315). On the other hand, he represents a very modern accent on freedom by claiming that it is of utmost importance that people have "the possibility of actively dying their own death" (319). The second claim is expressed in a letter to Benedictine nuns in which he deals with excesses of life-prolongation that put many people in a state of "undead"

(324).

Again, Illich highlights with his intervention the counterproductivity of good intentions. He comes, however, close to endorsing euthanasia (but without using this term) in his claim that death has to be a “personal act” (322). Illich frequently questions the modern demand to control every aspect of life and there are very good reasons for doing that. To insist, however, that dying must be an active personal act comes very close to keeping death—one of the “existential uncontrollabilities of life” (Hartmut Rosa)—under control. Cayley’s comment helps to put this letter in perspective because Illich does not come up with it as a general rule for responding to this modern challenge but expresses mainly his spirit of friendship that he prefers to modern technological care.

Cayley claims that “Illich’s theology of death was entirely orthodox and deeply rooted in biblical and patristic sources” (319). Illich is close to a theology of death that we can find in religious traditions still today. But is he really representing a biblical perspective? Is not the Hebrew Bible a manifestation of a “God of the living” as Jesus himself maintained (Mt 22:32)? The writer Eli Wiesel summarizes in his book *Open Heart* the Jewish perspective in the following way: “We sanctify life, not death. [...] Of course, we must accept the idea—the reality—that every man is mortal. But Jewish law teaches us that death is not meant to guide us; it is life that will show us the way.” Reflecting on the *Akeda* he criticized a sacrificial type of Christianity that sees in the threatened Isaac a prefiguration of Jesus’ crucifixion and concluded that “for the Jew, all truth must spring from life, never from death” (*Messengers of God* 1977, 90). Girard justly opposed Wiesel for this portrayal of Christianity because his Christian understanding of sacrifice does not deviate from the Jewish emphasis on the holiness of life. Girard calls death in *Violence*

and the Sacred “the worst form of violence” (32). In *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* he deconstructs the worship of death that characterizes so many (early) religions by showing how the scapegoat mechanism turns the death of the victim into a spring of life. The violent sacred causes people to view death “as if it were productive of life”, a view that Girard recognizes as idolatry: “death is once again covertly deified” (82). It is along this line of thinking that Girard prefers the Judgement of Solomon in the Hebrew Bible to Sophocles’ *Antigone*. Whereas Antigone dies for her dead brother the good harlot risks her life for the living child. “The Gospels clearly define what makes the tragic text somewhat inferior to the biblical texts when they say: *Leave the dead to bury their dead.*” (*Things*, 245; quoting Mt 8:22). Cayley refers to this provocative saying of Jesus but does not relate it to Illich’s reflections on death (36). Illich’s theology of death misses the crucial difference between the tragic and the biblical text.

This becomes especially visible in [Agamben’s](#) application of Illich’s view of death, which resulted in a harsh critique of the Catholic Church and Pope Francis for agreeing to measures taken against the spread of Covid-19. Agamben refers to Illich in his claim that “from Antigone to today” it had never happened before that “cadavers should be burned without a funeral [...] solely in the name of a *risk*”. Today we know that so far the virus has killed more than five million people. Even when Agamben wrote this text in April 2020, Italy had already been severely hit by the pandemic. From the perspective of the holiness of life it makes sense to protect living people from being infected by the virus. It remains a sacrificial attitude to prefer funeral rites to the health and safety of living people. I think that we have to move beyond Illich’s theology of death by aiming for a theology of life that does not neglect the reality

of death but believes in the God of life who will finally destroy death, who is “the last enemy” (1 Cor 15:26). Illich rejected views that see death as an enemy. This is again an attitude that is closer to tragic thinking than to the biblical spirit. His theology of death was more concerned with the *ars moriendi*—the art of dying—than with resurrection. Dietrich Bonhoeffer—Cayley mentions many affinities between the Protestant theologian and Illich—was very clear about the difference between the art of dying and faith in the resurrection: “We’re more concerned to get over the act of dying than to overcome death. Socrates mastered the art of dying; Christ overcame death as ‘the last enemy’ (I Cor. 15.26). There is a real difference between the two things; the one is within the scope of human possibilities, the other means resurrection. It’s not from *ars moriendi*, the art of dying, but from the resurrection of Christ, that a new and purifying wind can blow through our present world” (*Letters and Papers from Prison*). I am not sure how Illich would have responded to this insight of Bonhoeffer’s. It could be that he would have agreed because his work is not a systematic theology but the result of his many engagements with challenges our modern world has faced. He responded to a world that is out of balance in a necessarily unbalanced way. David Cayley frequently stresses in his book that Illich was “a proscriptive rather than a prescriptive thinker”. This is an important qualification that should never get out of sight if one reads Illich’s work. His emphasis on the counterproductivity of good intentions remains a valid warning for our times. It would, however, be very dangerous to turn these warnings into prescriptions. Agamben’s essays on the pandemic succumb to this mistake and hurt the legacy of Illich. David Cayley partly fell into the same trap in his blogs on the Covid-19 crisis. His book about Illich, however, will remain a highly valuable guide to this important work.