

READING IVAN ILLICH*

by Lee Hoinacki

On various occasions, I have set out on the perilous enterprise of attempting to interpret Ivan Illich. One day an astute questioner angered me, blurting out, “Oh, so you produce Cliffs Notes!”¹ After calming down I thought about her comment and concluded that, Yes, I did indeed want to do something like that; I believed this could be an honest work. After nearly forty years of knowing Illich, and discussing his writings with others, I think that a certain kind of midwifery can be enlightening, both for me and for his readers.

People sometimes regard Illich as if he were a social critic, or a historian, or a philosopher, or — more rarely — a theologian. But starting with one of these categories, many go astray. Illich has not produced a coherent social theory; he has not written a major historical study; he will not be remembered as an important twentieth-century philosopher. But he has made startling contributions in each of these areas. For example, the critical outline described in *Deschooling Society* (1971) enables the perceptive reader to see the structure and myths that drive the beliefs of modern society. Those unfamiliar with the tradition of apophatic theology mistakenly view the book as only about schools. *Tools for Conviviality* (1973), with its dimensional analysis, goes far to suggest a sensitive

* From: *The Challenges of Ivan Illich* (eds) Carl Mitcham & Lee Hoinacki, (SUNY Press, 2002, pp 1-7). Editor's note: The last paragraph of the original essay has been deleted in this version. That paragraph referred to the motives of the authors contributing to the collection of essays gathered in *The Challenges of Ivan Illich*.

1 The trade name of a series of synopses of, for example, Shakespeare; using them, students may be able to pass exams without having read the original.

and complex theory of the Western tool, today called technology. Critics of the medical system can still profit from the most revelatory notion in *Medical Nemesis* (1976) —cultural iatrogenesis. If Illich's general thesis in *Gender* (1982) is accurate, much of the social and economic history of western Europe should be interpreted differently. People bothered by religious questions often note that he is a perceptive commentator on Sacred Scripture, that he sometimes speaks to them with disturbing insight.

The first difficulty in approaching him is that people look in the wrong direction —they look toward Illich. In this respect, the example of Soren Kierkegaard is instructive. Kierkegaard held that one could not examine his body of writing as if one were reading a textbook on physics or literary criticism. One could only reach a verdict on the truth of what he wrote by responding out of one's own individual existence. The issue is not one of objective verification, but of subjective simplicity or purity.

Apropos of this view, Illich himself suggests that the entire question of an object in the modern sense, leading to the notion of hard objectivity or "objective truth"—that is, separated from the person presumably knowing—may find its origin in the thirteenth century.² This kind of objectivity contributed greatly to the creation of contemporary science and to the disembodiment of a sensuous universe. Most viciously and destructively, it continually arises in the way many people instinctively view the other, whether that other is intimate or stranger. Because of this radical disconnection of seer and seen, many are easily seduced to believe that it is legitimately progressive and productively efficient to instrumentalize all of creation: nature "out there," in the other, or in oneself.

2 Ivan Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text: A Commentary to Hugh's Didascalicon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 64, n. 54.

Throughout his writings, Illich peremptorily rejects the kind of dichotomization that leads to such an aberration.³

Writers, such as Donna Haraway, who look critically at contemporary science point out some of the nefarious consequences deriving from this sort of objectivity⁴. But many readers of books are infected by the prodigious successes of modern science, no less than by the spirit and ideals of the Enlightenment. Kierkegaard is a kind of anomaly, awkwardly at odds with the ideas of progress predominant in the nineteenth century. Illich is not a twentieth-century Kierkegaard, but his life and work call for a stance similar to that demanded by Kierkegaard. Unless I proceed in this way, I will never grasp the import of Illich's criticism of the Western experiment.

A reading that objectifies Illich's books, isolating them from myself, from where I am, from the way I live, begins as a performance in dilettantism and ends as a feeble exercise in futility. Illich-as with any person-cannot be subjected to some assessment according to an objective, impersonal, universal standard. Adolf Hitler's diagnostic treatment of homosexuals and Jews exhibited not just the criminality but also the sinfulness of a universalizing procedure. Along with certain other persons— with whom he shares important affinities and experiences—Illich presents a discomfiting challenge to readers and friends: the more acute and painful, the more one gets closer to him and his writing.

3 See his remarks in Ivan Illich and Barry Sanders, *ABC: The Alphabetization of the Popular Mind* (San Francisco: North Point, 1988), pp. 119- 127; Ivan Illich, *Gender* (New York: Pantheon, 1982), especially pp. 74, 75 (the Notes), and 146 (the text); also, Lee Hoinacki, "Friendship in the Writings of Ivan Illich," unpublished manuscript, 1995.

4 Donna J. Haraway, *Modes_tWitness@Second_Millennium* (New York: Routledge, 1997); for example, see pp. 23-39.

For many, Illich incarnates the character of witness; he bears witness against our time. To recognize and grasp his unique fit in that place, one can look at some of the likenesses and differences between him and two other contemporary witnesses: Paul Celan and Primo Levi. I assume that the notion of witness today conjures up the specter of twentieth-century abominations. These two men, who with Illich also experienced the frightful maliciousness of fallen humans, help to situate him because of their proximity in ethnic origin, physical geography, and historical time. Celan and Levi, too, were Europeans who were privileged with a profound immersion in the disciplines of Western high culture.⁵ These men, directly, in their flesh, were pierced with what many judge to be the overarching evil of recent Western history, the hatreds and lethal power of National Socialism⁶. Their act of witnessing was expressed indomitably and poignantly in language; they struggled to bequeath a literary monument testifying to the enigmatic monstrousness of our age.

Illich, while also experiencing in his family and flesh the same venom spurting out of delusionary sin, has not sought to be, like Levi, a chronicler of explicit cruelty and obdurate hardness of heart.⁷ From his writings, one sees that Illich focuses on something else, something truly beyond the depravity of National Socialism, but also more subtle and hidden. He sees what Karl Marx completely missed—and was brutally attacked by Marxists when that ideology was still

5 See, for example, Paul Celan, *Poems of Paul Celan*, trans. Michael Hamburger (New York: Persea Books, 1989); Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Summit Books, 1988); Marco Belpoliti, ed., *Primo Levi* (Milan: Marcos y Marcos, 1998).

6 Although Illich has also been affected by his experiences in places as diverse as India, Japan, and Latin America, I confine my perspective to what occurred to him in his early years in Austria, Dalmatia, and Italy.

7 See David Cayley, *Ivan Illich in Conversation* (Concord, Ontario: Anansi, 1992), pp. 1-2, 79-80. This book is the best introduction to and overview of Illich's life and work.

the fashion. He forcefully uncovers what Martin Heidegger only murkily ruminated about. The tools of the modern world—the world created by what Jacques Ellul recognized as *la technique*, the world of an all-encompassing instrumentalization —“create” a universe utterly transcending the conflict between social classes.⁸ Tools/technologies form an all-embracing world independent of nationalist or ethnic passions, a world whose hubris recognizes no limits, indeed, a world beyond the hegemony of *homo economicus*, a juggernaut to which both men and women now rush to sacrifice themselves. Nearly all have submerged themselves in *la technique*, instrumentalizing even love and reflection, thereby losing the wonders and joys of committed fidelity and contemplative idleness.

Facing this world, Illich could not follow the example of men such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Franz Jägerstätter.⁹ One could no longer be a witness by submitting one's neck to the executioner's garrote. After all, the only sense of witness is to bear witness. Although many did not want to admit the truth of what Bonhoeffer and Jägerstätter died for, those whose moral sensibility had not been completely corroded or corrupted could see what was going on; the evidence of wickedness was not hidden from them. Illich, however, faces a different perversion of the truth: He has to testify against almost everything that people, from pope through respected citizen to street corner drug pusher, regard as the marvels of modern civilization— the impressive and attractive accomplishments of education, transport, medicine, social services, and communications. He calls

8 Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (New York: Random House, 1964); and Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Bluff* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990).

9 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan, 1972); Gordon Zahn, *In Silent Witness* (Springfield, IL: Templegate, 1986).

into question the most noteworthy and awesome triumphs of human ingenuity, devices producing “goods” and services, hardware and software, instruments designed to control micro or macro universes.

The third edition of *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* lists one direct sentence from Illich: “In a consumer society there are inevitably two kinds of slaves, the prisoners of addiction and the prisoners of envy.”¹⁰ In these words, the compilers catch one of his crucial and cutting insights: Many, perhaps most persons, in modern societies have delivered themselves over to a kind of servitude that both binds and blinds. Faced with this depressing historical novelty, where can one stand? What can one possibly say? Can one only turn to the example of Don Quixote and learn to be a modern clown? Some novelists have imagined this option.¹¹

To express his own perceptions and understanding, Illich had to forge the concepts to make known what he believed to be happening in the contemporary world.

Why do the most privileged people in history choose slavery? His conceptual repertoire is rich and varied, his insights often sharp and subtle, and he has published a number of essays and short books. But his writing is characterized more by brilliant epigrammatic judgments, such as *Tools of Conviviality*, rather than by conventional or linear argument.

Illich does construct his own kind of argument, however, around one key notion —ritual—and unerringly reveals the frightening power of the world’s most ambitious and prestigious institutions to seduce the “favored” who participate in those institutions. In a disenchanted world, people above all

10 Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 47; *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 270.

11 See, for example, John Kennedy Toole, *A Confederacy of Dunces* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1987); and Heinrich Boll, *The Clown* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971). The major such tale in modern literature is Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *The Idiot*.

hunger for the reassuring order, the drama, the magic enclosure, the alembic of a ritual.

As he pointed out early in his public writing, it does not make any difference whether, for example, a school is in a miserable ghetto or a luxurious estate, whether it is “traditional” or “free,” whether organized by a totalitarian or democratic regime, it does and teaches exactly the same thing: there is always the hidden curriculum.¹² In some of his latest work, he continues to point out the power of ritual, for example, in all diagnostic and counselling encounters in an increasingly therapeutic-making-sick society.¹³

Socrates understood the power of the spoken word.¹⁴ At the other center forming the matrix of Western awareness of “what is,” so did Jesus of Nazareth. Many have pointed out that neither Socrates nor Jesus wrote anything.¹⁵ Historically, both Athens and Jerusalem agreed on the critical and decisive character of language. The question, however, repeatedly arises: What is the reality of language, whence comes its power? According to one interpretation, a tradition begun in ancient Israel reached its perfection in the doxologic mode of speech found, for example, in the Roman Ritual of the high Middle Ages. This specific view holds that Christianity, in the Roman rite, extended and perfected the Platonic doxologic account of purpose in language. Language primarily exists and, fi-

12 Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971). As the title implies, Illich's interest in writing this book is not in the school, as such. This is also true with the other institutions he examines in later books.

13 At the moment (early 2001), this work has only reached the discussion and early draft stages.

14 See Plato, *Phaedrus*, 274 to the end.

15 The exceptions only confirm the point: “But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger” John 8:6. Socrates drew a geometric figure-I assume, in the sand- for the slave boy of Meno (Plato, *Meno*, 82-86).

nally, only has meaning, in praise of the divine.¹⁶ Ritual language, then, can be powerful beyond all power because of its transcendent dimension; its counterfeits can be frightening because they sometimes successfully mimic a true doxologic language. Here one can feel the fire of the demonic.¹⁷

Illich was trained in ecclesiology and was especially intrigued by liturgy.¹⁸ He understood, I would argue, that the most ominous expression of secularization in the West was not the death of nature (although this was related), nor a misnamed materialism, nor sexual “freedom,” but the decline of liturgy, the routinization and emptying out of religious ritual in the churches. As he suggests, this process began with clerical actions to establish various assured institutional responses to God’s calling, later legitimated by a juridical or legal order; men hesitated to rest all hope on gratuitous gifts of grace. Illich captures the denouement of this lack of faith with the ancient Latin adage *corruptio optimi quae est pessima* (the corruption of the best turns out to be the worst). He has attempted to show that this apothegm accurately reveals the origins of “normative notions of a cruelty, of a *horrifying* darkness, which no other culture has ever known.”¹⁹ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, portrays institutional mistrust as a demonic temptation in Ivan’s poem, “The Grand Inquisitor,” perhaps literature’s most terrifying image

16 For a recent and impressive study of the tradition, see Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998). The actual expression of doxologic language today can most often be found, that is, experienced, in the Orthodox churches.

17 Although listening to the radio was an important pastime in our small-town mid western household when I was growing up, I remember only one broadcast almost as if it were yesterday: one of Hitler’s speeches. I must have been ten or twelve, could not understand a word, but also could not change the station or turn off the old Atwater-Kent.

18 See Cayley, Ivan Illich in *Conversation*, pp. 65-66.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 213. Emphasis in original. See also pp. 242- 243.

of the betrayal of the freedom graciously given to people by Jesus.

The historical record appears to establish conclusively that people and ritual go together. Part of the genius of modern institutions is that they developed rituals that speak to every aspect of peoples' desires: to vanity, to the love of beauty, to the pursuit of truth and order, to all sensual delights and, coming full circle to the origins of humans — according to scientific criteria —they especially speak to fear.²⁰

Illich has pointed out, again and again, that modern rituals, no matter the degree of sophistication found in their design and operation, lead inevitably to some kind of slavery.

[The school is] the locus of the ritual which reproduces and veils the disparities between myth and reality. [It is] the central social ritual (p. 54)

Of course, school is not, by any means, the only modern institution which has as its primary purpose the shaping of man's vision of reality. But school enslaves more profoundly and more systematically, since only school is credited with the principal function of forming critical judgment and, paradoxically, tries to do so by making learning about oneself, about others, and about nature depend on a prepackaged process. (p. 68)

Once young people have allowed their imaginations to be formed by curricular instruction, they are conditioned to institutional planning of every sort. (p. 56)

The man addicted to being taught seeks his security in compulsive teaching. (p. 57)²¹

20 Thinkers in the Christian tradition have discussed the gift of discernment: the ability to distinguish divine from diabolic internal movements. The gift enables one to recognize truth and falsity in ritual today.

21 Illich, *Deschooling Society*. He writes about the power of ritual throughout his works, but his initial presentation of the thesis is found in *Deschooling Society*. See

People of every nation are proud of their “good” schools, embarrassed by the bad ones; so it goes with other modern institutions as well. Illich, however, sees something else: a picture of universal misery, imposed with the power, at times apparently fiendish, of clever rituals. Contemplating this desolate landscape, he has chosen to stand by that most ephemeral of realities, the word. In one of his most striking statements, written at the end of *Tools for Conviviality*, he says:

I feel almost unbearable anguish when faced by the fact that only the word recovered from history should be left to us as the power for stemming disaster.²²

To take up words, he collapses three historical figures—poet, clown, and prophet—into one, making up his one voice. The very trope illustrates a characteristic of his method.

Poets and clowns have always risen up [to oppose oppression]

They demonstrate the follies of seriousness ...

The prophet can denounce creeds and expose superstitions.²³

Here one sees the way Illich often proceeds—more by way of acute assertion than by sustained argument. But the assertions have a grounding, deep sources in both ancient Western traditions and contemporary insights. Some of the essays included in this volume explore these traditions, others the insights. The authors, taken together, manifest a polyphonic texture of voices through their focus and approach, their re-

also Cayley, Ivan Illich in *Conversation*, p. 66.

22 Illich, *Tools for Conviviality*, p. 119.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 65.

spective style and interest and, thereby, reflect various facets of Illich's influence.

Because of his rootedness in his own tradition, Illich knows that no word or action is complete on its own. The current running through everything Illich writes and does is an anticipatory belief in his action's ultimate eschatological consummation.²⁴ The power of his practice-in life and art-derives from his recognition that he faces a crisis, that is, a cross-road. There are only two choices for him: Either he follows the contemporary world in its postmodern acedia, or spineless boredom, sauntering toward nihilism, or he lives in hope, eyes fixed on a future eschaton. Illich detailed the first option in his book *Tools for Conviviality*. He expressed the foundational germ of the second option in his early essay "Rebirth of Epimethean Man."²⁵

24 See Pickstock's comments in *After Writing*, p. 221.

25 This essay serves as the concluding chapter to *Deschooling Society*. It suggests the most fundamental position of his life and work.