

# HOW TO READ IVAN ILLICH

by Neto Leão

## Introduction

There is no obvious answer to the question of how to read Ivan Illich. Although his writings pertain to many academic disciplines —from economics to urban planning— they cannot be filed under a specific subject area much less an academic category, whether the humanities or the social sciences. Though his concerns ranged across centuries —from the ninth century Latin Church to Brazilian politics of the twentieth —and though he wrote a dissertation on Arnold Toynbee, and though he claimed in his later books to write as a historian, he was not recognized by the fraternity of academic historians. Though certified as a philosopher his writings do not constitute a philosophy – whether systematic as in Kant or aphoristic as in Nietzsche – nor are they directly about traditional topics in philosophy such as metaphysics, logic, or epistemology. Even if he died an ordained priest he did not write as a theologian, as did for instance, Jacques Maritan, Gustavo Gutiérrez, or Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Finally, his personal life and experiences are too rich and varied — including being the founder of the Puerto Rican festival in New York and being hounded by the CIA—to permit his thought and writings to be reduced to psychological or biographical imperatives.

Therefore, it seems necessary to suspend all prejudices – pre-judgments – when reading Ivan Illich. Even a causal reader of Illich cannot avoid noticing the tenor and topic of his writings suggest a man urgently confronting concrete sit-

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uations. It alerts the reader to approach the text not simply as intellectual productions but rather as thoughts crafted to illuminate and to clarify lived experience. I am convinced that to read Ivan Illich appropriately necessitates listening to what he says and not only reading what he writes. Let the reader be warned: this opinion was shaped by the encounter with the first Illich book I carefully read in 2015. *Celebration of Awareness: a call for institutional revolution* (1969), made me feel like he was in a conversation with me, like he was speaking to me, as if the pages carried the breath of the spoken word. Where I stand today has been defined by that gripping experience, which sent me on a pilgrimage to search for his friends, collaborators, and students as part of the continuing quest to better listen to his words. I disclose this to acknowledge what his long-time friend, Lee Hoinacki, cautioned: “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.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Three lines of force**

I propose that to read Illich well the reader must be attuned to the crisscrossing of three lines of force that charge Illich’s texts. These three intersecting and intertwining lines emerge from a ‘diagonal’ reading. A diagonal reading does not ferret out what might be hidden between the lines but seeks to discover the lines of force that animate what is written. This does not mean that such lines of force are invented by the reader. Instead, they can be substantiated through a careful exegesis of the texts. Moreover, such attention will also reveal, to the alert reader, knots of the text wherein the

1 Hoinacki, Lee. Reading Ivan Illich, in (Eds) Lee Hoinacki and Carl Mitcham, *The Challenges of Ivan Illich*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002.

three lines combine to disclose the standpoint of the writer himself. The purpose of this article is to make plausible these claims.<sup>2</sup>

The theological is the first of the forces animating the writings of Illich. To properly grasp the written words of Illich, the reader cannot be deaf to the Word, as explained in Christian theology. What Illich says in his commentary on reading St. Victor's *Didascalicon* applies as much to reading his own writings: "the philosopher taught the goal of learning was wisdom as the perfect good, and Christians accept the revelation that this perfect good consists in the Word of God made Flesh."

The second line of force shaping what Illich writes is the personal, which has to do with his stance or attitude. He was a man who lived in hope and tried to avoid expectations; he was in the world and not of it. He suffered this paradox because he was fully aware that it was not a problem to be solved. In a world increasingly reshaped by man into a technological womb, Illich tried to live in a way that allowed for the gratuitous experience of freedom.

The third line of force forming much of Illich's writings is the practical. Illich wanted to influence his readers, which is why he wrote public texts. He engaged with the historically specific conditions of his time, acting as a public intellectual and even as a militant thinker. Widely lauded and occasionally decried as a savage social critic, Illich's pages are public documents that aim to awaken readers to their lived conditions.

2 I owe to Sajay Samuel the clarity of this proposition of how to read Illich. After reading my first draft of this essay, Sajay was able to see the potential within my arguments and helped me to clarify them by suggesting the structure of the three lines of force. He saw what was implicit and scattered throughout the text and helped me to find a better way to construct the argument. The quality of its construction and presentation is my responsibility.

These three lines of force sometimes condense into textual knots. Such knots in the text not only expose these three lines of force but in doing so, also discloses the stance of the writer as one faithfully consigned to the hands of God. Consider for example the sentence that ends his recently re-published essay on *The Powerless Church*: “I want to celebrate my faith for no purpose at all.”<sup>3</sup> It is a statement that not only indicates the personal stance of a theologically cultured person. The sentence also has a practical orientation insofar as it is part of an explicit call to action addressed to both the church hierarchs and the laity. As such, it is a sentence that condenses the theological, personal, and practical lines of force that, arguably, shape all Illich’s writings.

### *The theological line*

Illich was a man of faith and, as he described himself, “faith is a mode of knowledge which does not base itself on either my worldly experience or the resources of my intelligence. It founds certainty on the word of someone whom I trust and makes this knowledge which is based on trust more fundamental than anything I can know by reason. This, of course, is a possibility only when I believe that God’s word can reach me.”<sup>4</sup>

The incarnation of the verb is at the heart of the Christian gospel. Unlike the veneration of a distant and unreachable god, the incarnate verb can be loved in the flesh. The first epistle of St. John the evangelist gives a beautiful testimony to the tangibility of God’s word. “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with

3 Illich, Ivan. *The Powerless Church*, in (Eds) Valentina Borremans & Sajay Samuel *The Powerless Church and other selected writings: 1955-1985* (Pennsylvania State University Press, State College, 2018).

4 Cayley, David. *The Rivers North of the Future: the testament of Ivan Illich as told to David Cayley*. Toronto: House of Anansi, 2005, p. 57.

our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life" (1 John, 1-2). For Illich, the verb that became flesh is infused into historical time as the spoken word, the conversation, the discourse, the aula which, as a public event, is potentially also a political event. It is for this reason that Illich is both deeply attentive to how he writes and to how he speaks. For example, his hesitance in front of the microphone or other amplifying devices cannot be understood except as the consequence of a theological fidelity to the carnal limits of voice. As he suggests, words retain their carnality when they are spoken by a mouth and heard by a fleshy ear. In contrast, nowadays, most of the words a person hears today neither emanate from mouths nor are addressed to specific persons.<sup>5</sup>

Illich need not have written a word. He could have been as the messenger who announces the Word orally. However, he did write. As persuasively argued by Walter J. Ong, which Illich expands on in *The Vineyard of the Text*, the written text is fundamentally different from the spoken word since the first is permanent while the second disappears even as it is pronounced. Yet, Illich has remarked that he did not speak except as he wrote.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, in Illich, speech and writing are as one. This means not only that the written texts of Illich attempt the impossible feat of expressing the lived voice. It also implies a second impossibility – that his written texts should be read except as if spoken. Illich's insistence on the paradoxical interconvertibility of his written text and his speech can only be grasped within the theological horizon of

5 Illich, Ivan, *Loudspeaker on the Tower: Belfry and Minaret* (2000), unpublished manuscript.

6 In conversation with David Cayley, Illich disclosed "I've never written a line which I have the feeling I could have said. And people don't notice the difference between my speaking and my writing. They aren't aware how much, given my destiny, speaking obliges me to read off internal lines" (Cayley, 1992, p. 202).

the verb that became flesh. For as he said, “history becomes possible only when the Word turns into words.”<sup>7</sup> To appreciate his writings, a reader must be attuned to Illich’s effort to write with embodied words. A clue to such a manner of reading can be gleaned from Illich’s commentary on *Lectio Divina* in which he underscores reading as an ascetical practice that allows the reader to taste the voice impressed on the page, to savor the spirit between words, which cannot breathe unless the words are pronounced.

### *The personal line*

The power of Illich’s writings and his practices in the arts of suffering and of dying derive from the self-recognition that he confronted a crisis, that is, a crossroads. For Hoinacki, there were only two choices for Illich: either he would follow the contemporary world in the direction of its postmodern acedia, or spineless boredom, sauntering towards nihilism or he lives in hope, his eyes fixed on a future eschaton (έσχατος). In the past, acedia was part of the list of capital sins. The monk Evagrius Ponticus includes it in a list of eight capital sins. The one we have today – sloth – combines acedia (ακηδία) and laziness (οκνηρός) in the same term. However, the differences are considerable. Laziness is a matter of behavior, whereas acedia refers to the state of mind that leads to a ‘sadness of the world.’ It takes hold of the man denuding all his joie de vivre and throws him into the darkness of someone who has cut his own wings and cannot fly anymore. Dante defines acedia as the inability to love that leads to the complete despair and eventually suicide.

In contrast, the manner of living in hope to which Illich was called can be read in the afterword of *Deschool-*

7 Illich, Ivan; Sanders, Barry. *ABC: The Alphabetization of the Popular Mind*. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1988, p. 3.

ing Society (1971), entitled *The Rebirth of the Epimethean Man*. For Illich, hope is distinct from both a cheery optimism, which is indistinguishable from a romance with illusion, and the anesthesia of the soul, which is now called positive thinking. Illich lived hope in its strongest sense, as an abiding faith in the goodness of nature. Hope is an attitude towards life, a stance, a way of being in the world. Hope is nothing to do with expectations which are based on a more or less accurate forecasts and predictions of imagined futures.

In fact, Illich makes a very clear distinction between hope and expectation. Such ideas as “development” and “progress” express the attempt to replace the hope of achieving what is good with the expectation that needs will be met. Such notions promise and even guarantee a heaven on earth made by the powers of science, technology, and political economy to permanently break the constraints of natural thresholds. Illich follows this argument by emphatically clarifying that expectations refer to a “not yet” other than hope. Hope guides in the direction of the unpredictable, the unexpected, and leaves open the possibility to be surprised. In the last analysis, hope is grounded in another’s word. Expectations are based on managerial promises of unfolding development, endless improvement, ceaseless progress, and soluble problems. Expectations are grounded in claiming the right for services or goods delivered by an impersonal system that produces and distributes health, education, security, among other things. In this sense, hope confronts the unknown while expectations manage the unlikely. The one dwells in grace, the other rests on probability. Hope is rooted in the personal relationship with a friend whereas expectations are tethered to institutionalized roles. To live in hope means to dwell in the world knowing it is a gift from God and therefore to not be fully of it.

But what does Illich mean by gift?<sup>8</sup> Gift carries the sense of the gratuitous, of that which is given freely without obligations. The appropriate attitude towards a freely given gift is surprise. The cultivation of surprise before what is freely given and the clearing the obstacles to experience such surprise accounts for the personal line of force animating the writings of Illich. Illich wrote, “it is my strong belief that one aspect of modernity was the loss of gratuity” (Cayley, 1992). This is not only a factual sentence disclosing what Illich believed. Above all, it discloses the personal stance Illich took to the world. To read Illich rightly requires being sensitive to the personal line of force that animates all his written work.

### *The practical Line*

So far, I have suggested that being alert to two lines of forces — the theological and the personal — is indispensable to reading Illich well. However, no reading of Illich can be complete without attending to a third line of force that animates his public words. The practical line of force in Illich is as central as the other two lines of force.

8 It is interesting, as a philological exercise, to reflect on the use of the word δωρά (dora) on the gospels, from which δωρεάν (dorean) derives, for example – Pandora, literally the giver of everything, in the Greek world. It is interesting how in the Gospel according to Saint John δωρεάν (dorean) appears in a circumstance that explains the breadth of the sense of gift. In chapter 15, verse 25, Christ said: “... that the word might be fulfilled that is written in their law, They hated me without a cause”. Note that the idea of a gift is linked to an experience without cause, no reason. At first, the lines seem to tell us about the fulfillment of a prophecy. However, could have Christ treated hatred as a gift, something that, in his process of becoming the son of God, allowed him to cultivate a more heated attitude towards life? The meaning of something without reason, which carries the etymology of the Greek word, also appears with a small change, δωρον (doron), in the gospel according to Matthew, for example, with a much more literal sense of a present. In Matthew 10, verse 8, in the words of Christ: “freely ye have received, freely give”. In chapter 23, verse 19, Christ also said: “Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gift, or the altar that sanctifieth the gift?”. Here the offerings are the gift, a gift given for free (the word in German, Umsonst – literally out of nowhere – means gratuity). The scope of the gift, the present, this surprising gratuity is very clear in the Greek vernacular.



Illich has been called a militant intellectual for his deep and incisive critique of schooling, of healthcare, of work, city planning, and more besides. In each of these books, essays, pamphlets, and lectures, Illich attempted to invite the reader and the listeners to celebrate an awareness which can lead to practical, material, concrete changes, to instigate a feasible and concrete institutional revolution. But this is not the only sense in which Illich's writings are animated by a practicality. They are also shaped by his own lived experiences, sometimes a sustained encounter with a specific situation or person, and at other times by a chance phrase. For instance, Illich argues that a phrase from a feminist doctor "Mr. Illich, have you ever seen a human body" launched his most controversial book, *Gender* (1982). Similarly, the main ideas of the essays of *Celebration of Awareness: a call for institutional revolution* (1969) emerges from Illich's exposure to Puerto Ricans in New York and on the island, and from his time traveling through the deep South America where he found the real "vanishing clergymen."

One could say that this practical line of force is manifested in his role as a public intellectual. Without discarding this hypothesis, I suggest that Illich's practicality is better understood as that of a prophet, a point already made by Todd Hartch.<sup>9</sup> Yet, I both agree and disagree with Hartch. Illich's pamphlets and books on public issues such as schooling and reading were prophetic but not because, as argued by Hartch, they spoke of a future or because they spoke of the truth as he saw it. Instead, Illich is prophetic in the sense of revealing what lies overlooked on the surface of the present. The prophet sees what others cannot because they do not have eyes to see. In this sense, Illich is better described as a man of faith

9 Hartch, Todd. *The Prophet of Cuernavaca. Ivan Illich and the crisis of the West*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

rather than as a militant intellectual, a Christian anarchist, or social reformer. A man of faith does not imply a credulous believer, but rather a man who lived in the child-like simplicity of his faith. And faith, as Kierkegaard wisely put in the *Works of Love*, “invitingly volunteers to be man’s companion on the way of life but petrifies the one who impudently turns around in order to try to understand it.”

I have suggested that three intersecting lines of force frame all Illich’s writings. That these lines of force constituting his writings can be seen even in the first essays he penned. To support this argument and for the purpose of this article, I analyze only one essay Illich wrote as a young man and later republished in his first book titled the *Celebration of Awareness*.

### **Here, in Puerto Rico, we...**

In 1992, when asked by Cayley about where his home was, Illich named Puerto Rico. Illich confessed he had never been able to say, ‘Here in the United States, or in Mexico, or in Göttingen, or in Marburg, or anywhere else, we.’ Of the many places in which Illich lived he could only say, ‘Here, people do this.’ Even if Illich could not say, ‘We Puerto Ricans,’ it was the only place of which he could say, ‘Here, in Puerto Rico, we wouldn’t do that.’<sup>10</sup>

I will return to this sentence after I analyze the text to which this sentiment most pertains. Illich wrote a short article in 1959 entitled *Puerto Ricans in New York: Not Foreigners, Yet Foreign*. The title makes explicit that the issue Illich wants to discuss is the situation of American citizens who felt foreign in their ‘own country.’ Between 1951 and 1956, New York received about half a million Puerto Ricans in waves of immi-

10 Cayley, David. *Ivan Illich in Conversation*. Toronto: House of Anansi, 1992, p. 88.

gration that was considered to not yet have peaked. Foreigner refers to a legal status and implies a country of citizenship. In this sense, Puerto Ricans were not foreigners in New York. In fact, Puerto Ricans have been American citizens since 1917, the year that the United States Congress passed the Jones Act. Since then, Puerto Rico has been considered an associated state of the United States. It was not until 1947 that Puerto Ricans won the right to elect their own governor. Even today, Puerto Rico is not represented in the US Congress. Moreover, although they are American citizens, Puerto Ricans were perceived and treated as if they were immigrants, particularly by the Irish and Italians immigrants who preceded them. In this sense, the Puerto Ricans were foreign, which refers above all, to customs, habits, mores. Regardless of what their passport stated, Puerto Ricans were strange to New Yorkers and strangers in New York, whether in their modes of living, the rhythms of their language, their religious practices, or in their relation to the environment and each other. Illich's essay was devoted to both elucidate Puerto Rican ways to New Yorkers as well as to denounce the 'lack of consideration on the part of New York civic leaders.'

I have suggested that reading Illich coherently requires attending to three lines of force that animate his work. This short and early essay carries the signature of the interweaving of the theological, the personal, and the practical dimensions of an Illichian argument. The theological line of this essay is quite clear since it informs the core question Illich poses and the answer he offers: what do we do when a stranger knocks at our door? We celebrate! The personal line follows Illich's invitation for those who, like him, search for a form-of-life that is open to another's way of living while still being rooted in one's own history and culture. The practical line is also clear: by working with some people, Illich made New Yorkers less foreign to Puerto Ricans. The festival he conceived and

helped organize is celebrated today as the National Puerto Rican Day parade in New York city, and remains a monument to the practicality of Illich's ideas.

### *1. The personal line*

On October 27, 1951, Illich boarded an old US Navy ship named USS General Harry Taylor in the port city of Bremerhaven, located north of Bremen, that was bound for the United States. The twenty-five-year-old Illich left Europe and docked in New York on November 6 of the same year. Illich came to the US with the intention of doing postdoctoral research at Princeton University on alchemy in the work of thirteenth century philosopher, Albert the Great.

However, on his very first day in New York City — literally on his first afternoon— while meeting with some of his grandfather's old friends, Illich heard about the 'issue' concerning Puerto Ricans in New York. His hosts who lived on 75 East St commented on the need to basically leave the city because of 'these people' who kept coming. This peculiar encounter generated in Illich a curiosity regarding the situation of 'these people.' As he recounted to Cayley, the very next day Illich walked to the barrio, far from the central attractions of New York, and, for two days straight, wandered up and down 122 street between 5th and Park Avenue. There he found the Puerto Rican markets, people assembling on the streets, and got a taste of their ways. After these two days, heeding an inexplicable call, Illich went to Cardinal Francis Spellman's<sup>11</sup> office and asked to be enlisted to any parish near the Puerto Rican community. Illich turned away from his offer at Princ-

11 Francis Spellman had been Archbishop of New York since 1939. During the Second World War, he was a Vatican mediator on the Council of Archbishops for Military Service in Washington DC. He also shared the anti-communist spirit that characterized the 1940s/50s of the official church in the United States. The cardinal participated in the political group of Irish Catholic immigrants who, in the 1960s, with the Kennedy family, elected the first Catholic president in the history of the United States.

eton on that day, abandoning the original reason for coming to the United States in the first place, and took over the Incarnación Parish, located in the northern tip of Manhattan, in a neighborhood called Washington Heights.<sup>12</sup> It is interesting how this kind of abrupt change in Ivan Illich's trajectory is constantly repeated. As he once said, he never knew how to explain what led him to make the most important decisions of his life. And this was certainly one of them.

Yet, the sudden turn towards 'these people' cannot be understood without noting the interweaving of personal decision and theological principles. In Illich's understanding of the Good Samaritan, something, or I should say, someone moves one's entrails towards the other, and in so doing reveals who is one's neighbor. It is impossible to institutionalize this visceral and personal movement. Responding to it consists in practicing a way of living that is open to the surprise of the other's face. Religious obligations blunt and even suppress the impetus of the invitation towards another which comes from the bowels. Illich's understanding of ethics is based on a personal vocation rather than obedience to laws, it is formed of forging relationships that come from responding to a call rather than behaving in accordance with a categorical imper-

12 Taken by the desire to feel a little of the experience of walking to the barrio, I decided to walk from the Grand Central Terminal, in Manhattan, from 42nd Street to Incarnación Parish, in Washington Heights, 175th Street. It was in the winter of 2015, January. It was -8°C. After two and a half hours of walking the twelve kilometers of asphalt, I arrived at the parish. The route is curious. What begins as a city of skyscrapers, exuberant expressions of triumphant riches and cosmopolitan air, becomes a suburban landscape starting from 122nd Street, with smaller and simpler buildings. However, after passing through Columbia University Hospital, Broadway Avenue intersects with St. Nicholas Avenue, at 169th Street; the change is remarkable. The atmosphere is different. I felt like in a Latin American country. Only Spanish was heard in the streets. Despite the cold that cut my skin, the streets seemed to convey a warmth, a different welcome, regardless of a more shabby appearance. When entering a store in search for a hot coffee, the clerk did not even consider directing me the word in English. We did all the counter conversation in Spanish, as if we had been in the Dominican Republic, the country of origin of most of the residents who currently live in the region.

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## *2. The theological Line*

Illich's decision to turn away from the intended doctoral work at Princeton and to become a priest at Encarnación parish was a response to the call he heard. But his personal decision is not comprehensible outside his faith. One key that opens several arguments of Illich's methodology can be found on his exegesis of the parable of the Good Samaritan, The Gospel according to St. Luke.<sup>13</sup> The parable is simple and straightforward. It was told as an answer to the question of a scribe, therefore a master on the law of the Torah, who asked Christ about who the neighbor was in one of the most important commandments of the law, love thy neighbor as thyself. After being assaulted by thieves, a Jewish man is left for dead in the vicinity of a road that connects two cities. Two men of the same ethnicity as the half-dead man, both with important positions among their own – a priest and a Levite – and a third man of another ethnicity – a Samaritan, cross paths with this dying man. The first two pass on, whereas the third one reached out to help him.

Why did Christ choose a priest as an example of the men who passed by the dying man? The shallow answer is that Christ had used the figure of the priest to condemn the religious hypocrisy of his day. A priest of the Jewish people was elected by God through rigorous scrutiny. In addition to the privilege of entering the place of the Saints, first in the tabernacle and then in the Temple of the Lord in Jerusalem,

13 The reader of Illich was introduced to his exegesis of the parable of the Good Samaritan only after the conversations with David Cayley, later compiled in the form of the book *The Rivers North of the Future. The Testament of Ivan Illich as told to David Cayley* (2005). In chapters 1 and 2 (Gospel and Mystery respectively) the reader will find Illich's central thesis on the corruption of Christ – *perversio optimi quae est pessima* – and its implications regarding the institutionalization of faith, that is the rise of Samaritan corporations.

the priest presents the burnt offerings to God, the bread of his God and must therefore be in a state of holiness (Leviticus 21, 6). He examines his people, deals with disputes, adjudicates on sensitive matters, and represents his nation through offerings to God. That is, the priest is a position of extreme importance, charged with authority and mediates the relationship between God and the people to which he belongs.

The Torah also legislates how this priest must behave to be fit for service. In Leviticus 21:1, “And the Lord said unto Moses, ‘Speak unto the priests the sons of Aaron, and say unto them, There shall none be defiled by the dead among his people: But for his kin, that is near unto him, that is, for his mother, and for his father, and for his son, and for his daughter, and for his brother, And for his sister a virgin.” In the parable told by Christ, the man who fell into the hands of robbers is said to be half-dead. In other words, the Law that underlies the behavior of the priest, the mental space that shapes the life of this priest, forbids him from touching a dead body. There is nothing more prudent, in this sense, than to leave this apparently dead body at the risk of becoming unclean. After all, it is to preserve his holiness that this man refuses to touch the dead body of a stranger. The priest follows the dictates of good conscience to fulfill his role before the people of God; to maintain meticulous compliance with the Law, which would undoubtedly have been bred into his very bones and sinews by years of devoted practice.

And what about the Levite? Does he have an explanation as scrupulous as that of the priest for crossing to the other side of the road when he sees the dying man? Yes. He handles all the utensils that belong to the Temple. None but the Levite can handle the utensils which are used and touched by the priest during the many rituals and offerings to God. In other words, the law that applies to the priest extends to the Levite, mainly due to his direct interaction with everything

that the priest touches. He is in the service of the Temple and belongs to God, set apart to serve and assist the priest (Numbers 3: 5, 10). The same prudence pricks the mind of the Levite, who, given the possibility of becoming impure, passes by the half-dead man.

Thus, although the two men are of the same ethnicity as the man left for dead, we see that the moral structure that governs the culture and the system of relationships of these two clergymen justifies their apparent disregard of human suffering. Although countless commentaries of the Christian bible take that tack, I do not see in this story any hypocrisy on the part of the priest and the Levite. On the contrary, all they can be blamed for is a precise and scrupulous reading of the Law. It is because they do not want to be unclean before God and his people that they do not touch the half-dead man (possible corpse).

Finally, what does it mean to be a Samaritan? Who is this third guy? Do we find in him the “ideal type” of love thy neighbor? The Samaritan is a type who, being a former Jewish settler of Samaria, fell away from the precepts of God and, even worse, also worshiped foreign gods (2 Kings 17: 24,41). For generations, those who settled in Samaria – called Samaritans – were considered by faithful Jews to be semi-idolaters. The Chosen People should not even want to speak to people of the “apostate race” (Barrett, 1978).

In St. Luke’s narrative, the journeying Samaritan approached the dying man’s feet and when he saw him, he was moved by his guts towards that man (in Greek ‘splankhnízomai’ – most, if not all modern translations choose the concept of compassion or pity for such word, although literally it unequivocally refers to a visceral movement; viscera = splankhna).<sup>14</sup> To be viscerally touched is a movement within

<sup>14</sup> According to Frederico Lourenço, the verb ‘splankhnízomai’ is used eleven times in each of the three synoptic Gospels (St. Mathew, St. Mark and St. Luke, totaling 33 cases).



the being, which can and must result, if answered, in actions of love. The source of this movement that stirs the viscera is a mystery on which I dare not spend words. Yet, the image of feeling visceral pain is neither a philological whim of Saint Luke nor a textual ornament. It points to the source from which Christian love is born. In keeping with the parable of Christ, Illich lived the impossibility of categorizing ‘who is my neighbor.’ A neighbor can be anyone who is viscerally felt and one can or can not answer that call.

It is in the third paragraph of his essay that Illich discreetly discloses this theological well from which he draws his argument. Illich distances himself from the typical take on foreigners. Either they are designated as strangers and consistently treated as outsiders or, in a misunderstanding of St. Paul’s instruction “to make himself Jew with the Jews and Greek with the Greeks,” indifferently included under the ‘we are all Americans’ banner. The first approach precludes any possibility to cherish and correspond with unique and unknown ways of living. The second, on the other hand, denies the heritage, the sap of tradition which has fed peoples from the roots of history. The first stance has no windows or doors that enlarge the boundaries that encircle a community whereas the second is a universal approach that colonizes the imaginary space of persons and their heritage.

In the case of Puerto Ricans in New York, the first approach to foreigners was predominant. What scandalized Illich was the stereotypical way in which New Yorkers and, especially the church,<sup>15</sup> approached Puerto Ricans. He was

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It refers always or directly to Jesus (Matthew 9:35, 14:14, 15:32, 20:34; Mark 1:41, 6:34, 8: 2; Luke 7:13) or to characters in the parables of Jesus, who are like alter egos of Christ (the king who forgives the slave’s astronomical debt in Matthew 18:27; the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:33; or the father of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:20, who is viscerally moved when he sees the state in which the son returns to home.

15 It is important to make a clarification regarding the use of the words church or Church (capital C) throughout the text. When I use church, I mean the institution, the “it,”

disturbed by the lack of sensitivity and perception of the locals to the newcomers who were unlike the Italians and Irish. A conflict was already simmering in the barrio between the Irish and the Puerto Ricans. A different manner and set of policies were needed to meet the Puerto Ricans where they were. Illich reported that he was impressed by the fact that he could find in Cardinal Spellman an attentive listener to his suggestions of how the church should position itself with respect to the situation in the barrio.

To better explore the theological warrants for some of the practices and mores of the Puerto Rican faithful, Spellman suggested a meeting between Illich and Joseph Fitzpatrick, the priest and professor of sociology at Fordham University – where the cardinal himself had studied. In fact, the two became great friends and companions in the campaign for a New York more receptive to Puerto Ricans. Fitzpatrick had authored *Puerto Rican Americans: The Meaning of Migration to the Mainland* (1968) and was familiar with the issue when Illich met him. By the time Illich took over the barrio parish in 1952, a third of the baptized Catholics in Manhattan and the Lower Bronx were Latin Americans. Until that time, Puerto Ricans were the first large group of non-European Catholic immigrants with religious traditions very different from the orthodoxy in these neighborhoods. The number of

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which embraces the bureaucracy, the administration, and the apparatus of the Catholic tradition. When I use Church, I mean the Mystical Body of Christ, the "She", not always visible nor necessarily under the wings of the church. By making such distinction I am not saying that the Catholic church is not within the Mystical Body of Christ, to which I call Church, where Christ is the head (see St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians, his first and second letter to the Corinthians and his letter to the Colossians). I rather use Church to embrace communities and forms-of-life not necessarily under the approval or recognition of the church to avoid narrowing the Mystical Body to one institution. If the analyzes of this essay was one concerning the Lutheran church, or the Baptist church or the churches of Christ I would follow the same method of differentiation between the church "it" and the Church "She". The distinction, not the way I apply it, between the church "it" and the Church "She" can also be seen in Ivan Illich, *The Powerless Church*, *ibid*.

Latin priests was meager, not only in Manhattan but also in Puerto Rico. In fact, such was the difficulty of access to certain Puerto Rican villages, that a priest's visit was sporadic, if not exclusively for a sacrament. Many on the island baptized their own children without the presence of a priest. The chapel, in addition to receiving some masses, never every Sunday, was a communal meeting and celebration space for the patron saint San Juan, named after the country's capital. Given this history of the Puerto Ricans, attending Sunday Mass did not reaffirm, for them, any fundamental practice of the Catholic faith.

The idiosyncrasy of Puerto Rican Catholicism caught the attention of Ivan Illich. He realized, with keen sensitivity, that Europe and the United States did not know this more organic and less institutionalized faith. Moreover, the judgments formed about 'these people' even from within the church were based on denigrating the less institutionalized faithful as somehow less pious. Perhaps it was this contact with day-to-day lived faith that prompted Illich to find theological support for it in canon law. In any case, Illich cites church Law that recognizes a marriage between Catholics even when not performed in front of a priest.<sup>16</sup> The Puerto Rican practice of electing a layperson to carry out the sacrament of marriage was thus legitimized if a priest could not visit a distant village for a month. This contact is also what probably motivated Illich to travel from village to village in the secluded mountains of Puerto Rico. As Fitzpatrick reported, "once Illich arrived at Incarnation Parish and realized that many newly arrived Puerto Ricans had moved into the area, he went to Puerto Rico, learned Spanish almost overnight, and spent one month on foot exploring many aspects

16 The reference is to the Code of Canon Law prior to the Second Vatican Council and to the Apostolic Constitution *Sacrae Disciplinae Leges* of John Paul II. In other words, the Pentecost of 1917, which had undergone its first reform of the Corpus in 1959, by John XXIII.

of Puerto Rican life.”<sup>17</sup>

### *3. The practical Line*

For five years, from 1951 to 1956, Illich lived in the parish of Washington Heights working directly with the Puerto Rican community as a priest, but above all as a community leader. In my conversation with Mother Abbess David at the Monastery of Regina Laudis in Connecticut, Illich’s status as a community leader became clear. M. Abbess David was the daughter of immigrants, of Peruvian mother and English father, and lived in the barrio. She was experiencing a crisis of faith due to her sociology course and went to the closest parish to seek advice from the priest. That’s how they met in 1952. Illich encouraged her to get involved with founding the El Cuartito de María (The Little House of Mary), an apartment to house a small library, ludic games, and some tables and chairs, where women from the barrio could mind their children. They could come and go freely, to study, to have fun or simply to rest. As Joseph Fitzpatrick noted, “this was exactly the kind of casual, personal relationship that would have been characteristic of a barrio in Puerto Rico.”

Priests, social workers, and teachers of all kinds were immersed in a multitude of Spanish speakers. In the words of Ivan Illich: “they needed to learn to speak Spanish, more than anything, they needed to tune in their ears and open their hearts to the anxieties of people who were alone, frightened and helpless.” In 1956, Illich’s engagement culminated with the legendary celebration in honor to the patron saint

17 A hypothesis worth exploring at greater depth is whether and to what extent, Illich’s arguments in the *Vanishing Clergyman* (1959/1967) was shaped by and formulated in the wake of his experience with the Puerto Ricans. Specifically, the encounter with it in New York is Illich’s first direct contact with a living faith in which the priest was not necessary for the priestly functions. This manner of a relatively un-institutionalized and living faith was further affirmed during his later pilgrimages through South America.

of Puerto Ricans, San Juan. This first patronal celebration of the Catholic Church brought together more than thirty-five thousand people. Kaller-Dietrich says that Illich had given several coins to some thirty young Puerto Ricans to search the city's telephone directory for Latin names and surnames and to invite them for the party.<sup>18</sup> In the words of Fitzpatrick, "looking back on this, I recognize [Illich's] clear conviction of the need to enable the people to use their own resources in order to cope with their problems rather than constructing agencies and institutions to care for them."

The Fordham University courtyard, which hosted the festivities, had been taken over by a celebratory spirit. As the community spontaneously organized itself, food, dance, music, and merriment completed the fundamental triad of the religious experience: liturgy, ritual, and celebration. After twelve consecutive years of celebrating this feast since 1956, driven by Ivan Illich, the celebration of the patron, St. John, was made official. This celebration, over the past twenty years, has been transformed into the Puerto Rican Day Parade, in which more than six hundred thousand people participated in 2016. Today, it is considered one of the largest cultural festivals in the United States. Far more significant than a contemporary popular cultural attraction is the root of this celebration in Illich's efforts to midwife a Church in the barrio of Washington Heights.

Accordingly, the theological (response to who is the neighbor), the personal (reorientation from Princeton to the Barrio), and the practical (helping Puerto Ricans make something of a "home" in NYC) are all woven into this short essay.

## **Conclusion**

18 Kaller-Dietrich, Martina. *Vita di Ivan Illich: Il pensatore del Novecento più necessario e attuale*. Roma: Edizioni Dell'Asino, 2011.

I have suggested that to read Illich well, one must be alert to three lines of force or dimensions of his writings that animate them. The theological, personal, and practical lines of force are interwoven in his essays and express what I call Illich's necessity to write. Though I limited my analyses to one short essay that exposes a concordance between life and thought, I am almost convinced that one could see the same pattern throughout Illich's written pages. Puerto Ricans in New York not only combines Illich's intellectual scholarship with his immersion into the depths of a communal life not of his own. The essay also exposes the three lines of force that generate, arguably, all his written texts. The interweaving of the theological, the personal, and the practical dimensions of his essays express the integrity of thought and life in Illich. I also suggested that the interconnectedness of these three lines of force can often be gauged by a sentence or sentiment Illich pronounces. Earlier in this article I promised to revisit Illich's assertion that nowhere except in Puerto Rico could he say, 'here in Puerto Rico, we...' thought importantly, even in Puerto Rico, he could not say, "We Puerto Ricans."

This statement from 1992 can now be read as a clarifying the essay published in 1959. Though he plunged headfirst into the predicament of the Puerto Ricans in New York inexplicably moved by a call that he heard, Illich maintained a distance to the world to which he is nevertheless attached. He acknowledged feeling a kinship to Puerto Rico ('...in Puerto Rico, we...') but did not dissolve the distance between him and Puerto Ricans ('I could not say "we Puerto Ricans"'). The theological depth of his personal response to a call can be gauged by the fidelity of his stance to be in the world and not of it. In this sense, Illich is himself the knot of the essay he wrote, the man who renounced prestige to answer the call of his gut, to embrace the 'beaten' stranger, and to celebrate the gratuity of their friendship.

*Conspiratio*

This is how I read Ivan Illich. I do not claim this reading of how to read Illich to be the definitive version. Instead, what truth it possesses derives from its correspondence to where I stand, to the way I live. My hope is that this article can motivate few other stories. And hope does not disappoint.