

The Personal Decision in a World Dominated by Communication*

by Ivan Illich

Excuse my behavior.¹ It is they who want to tie me to a microphone but if I want to walk, I will walk. The rule is that whoever wants to, can interrupt my presentation [and] may do so at any time.

I want to thank Aldo [Zanchetta] and Don Achille Rossi, parish priest of Città di Castello. I have always admired him for the incredibly local *L'Altrapagina*, which is known in Mexico and in Germany. He always addresses the problems, the most general possible questions, from the local point of view. It is in Città di Castello that I met Aldo. We quickly understood each other, and here I am.

I told Aldo that I will make three manuscripts available to him. An introduction by me, an article by the professor of “business administration”, Sajay Samuel, —that native from India who is sitting there, and one from Silja Samerski.² I cannot give these manuscripts now for two reasons: that guy over there³ has not yet finished the article we want to include on the decision from the managers’ point of view; we have not yet

* Illich gave this talk – it would be his last– in Italian at the Scuola per la Pace (School for Peace) of the Lucca Province on October 2, 2002. Aldo Zanchetta arranged the meeting which an overflow audience attended. Paolo Coluccia transcribed the lecture from the DVD. <http://digilander.libero.it/paolocoluccia> (paconet@libero.it). Translation into English was a collective effort. The translation sought to preserve the flavor of the oral remarks. Accordingly, we added footnotes to clarify the lived contexts of some of his statements and [...] brackets to improve the readability of his spoken words.

- 1 He takes off his shoes while some technicians adjust the microphone.
- 2 German scholar who was part of the Illich circle.
- 3 He points to Sajay Samuel.

found the translator from German for the article of Silja, who is a geneticist and deals with the decision that forces women to undergo prenatal genetic consultation in certain countries.

I believe what I want to discuss with you is important and can be formulated in such a way as to draw public attention to the topic I want to present.

I have decided to speak freely, recalling my notes. That way it will be easier for you to interrupt me. One more thing: if my voice gets too low or if my pronunciation is such that I am difficult to understand ... please give me a sign! I have this cancer here that makes the mouth so painful that I cannot simultaneously think intelligently and wear dentures. Thank God at a certain time of my life I took Sanskrit courses. I submitted to that test, to that exercise of the saints almost thirty years ago, and so I started formulating sentences even without teeth, but please, protest if I am not understandable!

The matter I want to submit to your examination is the way in which so-called “communication” makes, for example, what Saint Ignatius would have called *electio*, more and more difficult. I am an admirer of the exercises of Saint Ignatius not only as a historian but also because of their good effects on me.

The exercises of St. Ignatius are an extraordinary ascetic-mystical innovation. They give you a method to find the will of God, which St. Ignatius names the call of God. They also are a method for the *electio*— [which refers to] what I want to do now so I can obey this vocation [the call of God]. For me they are also a demonstration of what is freely chosen in the sense of *electio*, that is, [of a personal decision] determined by a *telos*, by the good.

The thesis I want to discuss is the following: the more intensely all my thinking and my knowledge is the result of what is called communication today, the less I can decide, or rather make an *electio* of my life that is based on my knowledge, on my senses, on my common sense, on my own ex-

perience, on the circle [of my friends], on the *con-spiration* with friends — [all of] which allow me to sense the good. I want to make people think about the implicit danger that communication beyond a certain intensity poses to autonomous knowledge on which sovereign freedom is founded. Such freedom, shaped by our classical tradition and, in a completely new form by the Christian tradition, has formed the Western culture in which we live.

I want to proceed in the following way: first, I want to start by elaborating, a little more, the idea that Aldo has so cleverly hinted at in a few words of his introduction. It seems to me that it is important to untie, to disentangle [two ideas] — communication and peace — [but] what I can say here in Lucca is already more difficult to talk about in California, and even more so in your India⁴ or in your Islamic world⁵ of which I cannot speak because they do not have our tradition.

I will give you a small summary of my argument: in what sense do I allow myself to talk about this untying, this separation between peace and communication? Why do I show that communication beyond a certain intensity becomes inhuman? Aldo said it very well: “dis-incarnated” was his phrase — with which he surprised me, and I immediately went to write it down. Dis-incarnated is not the same as virtual, which does not exist. I want to make it clear that I will be speaking in a form — do not be scandalized, please — that is extravagant, from *extra-vagare* [to wander outside]. To wander [*vagare*] is a beautiful concept. In medieval Latin [it implies] giving oneself to the moment, leisureliness ...for which monasteries existed. [In] Saint Augustine, the word *extravagare* [suggests] to take leisure; to look at how you live today, here, from the outside. In this spirit, I want to speak extrava-

4 Refers to Sajay Samuel.

5 Refers to Samar Farage.

gantly. I also want to make people understand that, above all, communication is an attack, it almost always implies an attack on the common sense.

Common sense was previously a sense. It really existed as you can see in Leonardo's paintings and in discussions of his faith. Whether we have this sense in the pituitary gland or close to the heart [was debated]. Today, medicine no longer knows, anatomy no longer knows [the common sense], which was the sense for sensibly judging what was good, convenient, natural. In these circumstances, I speak extravagantly of the decrease or disappearance of common sense as a specific sense.

Then I will tell a parable. I will speak of a sentence that I had on my desk, a copy of an old document that I lent to someone who did not return it to me, and I returned to the archives of Spain to make myself another copy — I now know it by heart. [It is] a phrase from Philip II, King of Spain — a parable. A parable is not a similitude, a parable is not an analogy. As we know it from the studies of Holy Scripture, it is, in the best way, a jest, a joke, it is a Jewish, Arab joke. Or, like when I had to prepare homilies, I tried to read the Sunday Gospel until, at a certain moment, I started laughing and then I said to myself: "Now I understand!"

I want to tell you a parable about Philip II to make you understand what sovereignty is. I think it is very important to talk as concretely about communication as [we speak] about the extraordinary attack by Bush against state sovereignty right now, representing America as a guardian of the world. Why do sovereign states need a policeman beyond sovereigns to exist? I must talk about this because it seems to me that communication, used beyond a certain intensity and without ascetic self-control, [poses] a similar danger to the sovereign self.

For this reason, my next point will be a questioning, I don't like the word problematization. When I was a child, problems were seen only in mathematics, when I was 20 years

old, 25 years old I learned that poor children had problems; today everything is problematic, isn't it? [I want to question the idea of decision-making or self-determination] because the difficulty of so-called self-determination is it claims to require continuous information or communication.

And to finish, I end with a reflection on how the words and objects function in our modern society. The best way to quickly understand where I want to end up [is to say that words and objects function] magically, religiously.⁶ I don't want to be a religious man. I am the descendant of the martyrs who, according to Roman law which was very solid and precise, were thrown to the beasts as truly irreligious [*veri irreligiosi*]; they were people who somehow understood that Jesus freed us from what was then, as today, called religion.

Let's go to the first point, to disentangle [peace and communication]. I was asked to give an opening speech for a new peace center in Japan, one like all the centers for peace in Asia and Africa. They wanted someone from another part of the Third World and so they found Ivan Illich of Cuernavaca. Obviously, I'm not from there, but I put on my guayabera –the Mexican shirt– and I went to talk about the link between development and peace.

I had special difficulties in explaining what sense peace has today in the West, in Europe, in the Christian liturgical tradition. The Roman 'pax'... *Pah!* They needed the flag and the weight of weapons. The Christians arrived with a gesture that is disgusting in Japan —this is why I had difficulties —what in Latin was called the *osculum*, kiss, or better, *con-spirazione*, one of the culminating parts of the Mass, which was the kiss of the altar and then the sharing of this kiss; the common kiss [which] made the Holy Spirit

6 Illich does not develop this point at length in this talk. However, see his remarks in *The Rivers North of the Future*, (ed) David Cayley (Anansi Press, 2005), pp.158-161 on amoeba words and 'visiotypes' as icons.

present for the equal participation of everyone, whether king or water bearer, before the *comestio* [communion]. The idea of this *conspiratio* was the basis for the foundation of a liturgical and real community. Even the church fathers had difficulties with it. There is a nice passage by Tertullian who says that the Roman matrons cannot be sent to these celebrations, exposing them to this danger of conspiracy. Very soon it was called the ‘pax’ —our peace. If I speak of the tradition that I believe is common to us, but it certainly is mine, the conspiracy gives the sense of peace that is not Roman, not pagan, and not philosophically conceivable: the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Christian, who communicates it, who participates in it within the community. Thus, as a first question: what do we mean by peace? Peace, in this sense, is the one strong word with which the atmosphere of friendship created among equals has been appropriately named.⁷

I will not comment further on this point because it is sufficient for me to make you think about the difficulty that the intensity of communication, of the media, causes to the experience of personal sovereignty. “But Ivan, what are you talking about?” I am 77 years old. I remember in 1962 at the University of Chicago, when it was still considered criminal to doubt Development, and the *Populorum Progressio* was prepared with all respect and love, a small, recently appointed Marxist professor who was annoyed [by my criticisms] said: “Illich, you are not on the same wavelength as me, do not think you have communicated with me!” I thought he wanted to offend me, and I told him: “But I’m not a radio transmitter, it’s Ivan who speaks to you, I’m not a message that communicates to you, I have something to tell you.”

7 See “The cultivation of conspiracy” in *The Challenges of Ivan Illich*, (eds) Lee Hoinacki and Carl Mitcham, (SUNY Press, 2002), p.238.

When I utter them, my sentences are all a *copula*, you know what a *copula* is, don't you? In English I can say *copulate* and people immediately understand [the relation] between the subject and the predicate. Instead, communication replaces this vital, fruitful relationship with the mathematician "equal to" sign, with =. I was trying to explain to him that I wasn't trying to communicate with him. Until 1962, despite speaking to audiences of various kinds for 15 years, I had not yet met someone who would consider me a communicator. The difficulty, gentlemen in the other room [refers to the audience in the second room opened for the unexpectedly large number who came to hear Illich], physically fearsome for me, is to have this schizoid situation of speaking with [some] people I can see and, if I want, feel with my nose [deeply inhales], or touch... and to others who are somewhere else! This is not a point about making philosophical statements concerning the content of information, the accessibility of information, or the criticisms of receiving information. Instead, I want to make people think about the necessity to abstain, about the desire to renounce information, as a contemporary form of celebrating Friday. Meat is not bad, eating it is very good and is tasty, but it is renounced for ascetic reasons.

I want to talk about the structural danger communication poses to the certainty of seeing you here — it is one thing to talk to you here than to talk to people there [referring to the people in the other room]. When did I understand this? When this little girl said to me: "Do you know uncle? I saw Kennedy discuss - the President was already dead - with E.T." I don't know the name of E.T.⁸ But the girl no longer distinguished between what you [Aldo] said and what does not exist. I repeat her sentence because it is stronger than anything I would have dared to say. If I make my decisions based on things that were said to me, about which I must be educated,

8 Mimes the extraterrestrial figure of the eponymous film.

that other people know better than me and I don't know well, or at least not as well as they do, then the whole foundation of my epistemic being is in hearsay, which is precisely what we exclude as testimony in a democracy.

Ivan, where are you going?

I told you that I will tell you a parable. Looking at this little note, of a codex from the mid-16th century, which I had on my desk, and which then disappeared, which had been, not stolen, but not returned. Felipe II, successor of Charles of Spain, was a pious man. He got up at midnight, went to the chapel for an hour and then to his desk for an hour or two. A king goes to the desk! It was a very new thing. You, Sajay, made me understand that the idea of bureaucracy—which is much later than the time of Philip II—is a little crazy. I looked at this desk, in front of which he stood for two hours and made the final decisions on what his governors or vice-roys asked of him from all over the world.

The file that particularly interested me came from Peru. In Peru, as you know, the horse, the cow, the cattle, the donkey are important imports into the new world, just as tomatoes or agave are important exports to the other side. The presentations, "Jesus among the agaves..."; for example, make me laugh. The question posed there was about the right quantity of land and donkeys that should be given to emigrants who came to Peru from Spain. The viceroy gave them land and then the emigrants wanted to have donkeys or mules, they wanted them ... I don't have to explain why a donkey is used—although I did recently see, in a certain part of Italy when I visited a field, that a donkey could not be found. I wanted to show a German, who in 25 years had never seen a donkey, what a donkey was and, in Italy, you could not find a donkey! Yet, I speak of an animal whose use is obvious, at least in this certain cultural context. In all cases - do you understand me there, do I speak clearly? - the question was whether up to 4 donkeys could be allowed or if the governor was limited to 2 donkeys for the sus-

tenance of each family in Peru from Spain.

And on the margin of the document, Phillip II writes - I say it in Spanish: “*Dos Basta!*” [Two, enough!] The reasons were ecological, essentially. “*Dos Basta!*” And then, as he does for every other decision, in this codex, this file, he writes in his own hand, in a chapel: “*Así vos dice, con su reale gana. Yo el re.*” He goes to the next point, makes another decision, and once more writes: “*Así vos dice - so he tells you - con su reale gana.*” Help me to translate here, because the *ganas*... the desire, the will, the... how does it translate... *ganas*... autonomy, the will... it is very modern, it is a word that every peasant would understand... with his sovereign desire... *Yo el re* [I, the King]

You see, I present this to you as a parable of sovereignty making an election: *Dos, Basta!* As for the child watching television: two hours, *Basta!* For any decision, *Yo!* The *Yo*. The *I*, which can be spoken of in Italian with the word *Ego* — I personally met this Viennese doctor, Freud, who made the *Ego* into a substantive, a substance. And now, these fantasies about the fetus, about a substantive life, about a substantive ‘*I*’ are typical... conception(s) typical of the modern world.

I — the first person singular. Linguists tell me that the one who speaks uses the first-person singular ‘*I*’ [he points his index finger towards his chest]; the speaker tells you he speaks; or this [pushing the arms backwards outside the chest and making a sound with his voice]: eh! Linguists use pages to describe it, but essentially it is here [inside] or there [outside]. In different types of languages, the ‘*I*’ refers to something which is not a word, it cannot be said with a noun, nor can it be said with a name. If I say [imitates a child’s voice]: “Little Ivan wants”, evidently, I use a name, but we know that I am not yet old enough to have a...

To speak clearly, maybe it’s easier to explain it as I explain it to my Bremen students. In Italian it is called a *pronome*, in English it is called a pro-noun, in German it is said

fur-wort; perhaps with a little exaggeration I can say that the ‘I’ stands for a word, because there is no word to speak about this apophatic, unspeakably concrete being. [The “I” is] beyond description, just as the Greek Fathers considered God in apophatic theology, without words. The creation of the *Ego*, the creation of personality or, worse still, of identity, is a phenomenon of the twentieth century that profoundly undermines the sovereignty of the first person — the one who has, today it is called a “nose”, but for two millennia it was called ‘the common sense’ of knowing what is good —and replaces the good with value.

Why? My teachers and colleagues whom I respect continue to speak of Christian values, instead of talking about the revelation, the gift, the *bonum* that Jesus opened to us. But they lower the good to values that can be positive or negative, to value that can be calculated as more or less. Why do I say this? Because the extravagant way in which I look at the relationship between election and freedom on the one hand and decision and information on the other hand requires that I speak to you of the threat to the sovereignty of knowledge. That’s how it is for me! Leave me in peace! I don’t need scientific foundations! [Common sense judgment] would be better, superior, for what I will decide.

But now, the difficulty is this. In the booklet that I want to give to Aldo, to this bookseller here, I want to question what is called the consultation, I think that in Italian we speak of *consulta*? *Consultazione*? Consultations are of all kinds — before the operation of her breast, my nose, her abortion, to buy a house, to get married, about bad dreams. In the past ten years, a profession that did not exist before has multiplied in society — statistics are difficult to obtain because I would want to equate consultants with educators— but the jobs for consultants [have increased]!

Now, what I want to subject for your study is the in-

terpretation of two documents, which are the result of the conversations... —*mamma mia!* [looks at the clock] it's already 32 minutes! — two documents reporting a conversation that I never expected. You [Aldo] said that I've disappeared in the past ten years. Well, thirty years ago, when I decided not to function as a symbol of unity because I had become scandalous and because I was recognized all over the world I almost ceased to speak in religious circles, both Catholic, and non-Catholic, and simultaneously I almost never did an interview on television, radio ... nothing! But in the past ten years, I have reserved every free hour for conversation with a dozen people who have become friends. One is the young Indian [Sajay], who renounced his professorship to devote himself to studying how and why the business school trains the people who earn the most money as officials. Business administrators are people who earn more than half a million euros a year - it's a little crazy to think, but that's it! The business school curriculum is essentially the training of decision makers, consultants, is there a better word in Italian than *decisiori*?

Silja [Samerski], of the same age as Sajay, is not here today because she is in Germany. She has listened to forty very precisely recorded interviews of pregnant women by genetic counselors in a way that makes me tremble. She shows how the principles applied at the Harvard Business School to train decision makers are used to transform a pregnant woman who is awaiting a child into a decision maker who, based on probable information from a test and follow-up test results, identifies herself with a certain point on the probability curves to transform birth into a decision, so that the child can then say: "Mom, I was a good decision!"

Frightening!

Based on what? Based on the communication of information, based on a knowledge that is not here [indicates the nose], nor here [indicates the brain], and following Leonardo,

not even here [indicates the heart], but produced by university departments. The woman is told that the modern woman makes autonomous decisions, makes her own decisions. This completely ignores that this woman, and perhaps even mother, felt sovereign, not in governing Peru, but in directing her life in the same way as did Felipe II. Today, these women act, they are trained to act, according to rules used in the market by decision makers trained in the business school to make decisions based on statistical probabilities.

What a horror!

In the best of cases, statistics tells me about the incidence of a certain phenomenon in a chosen population, it never tells me anything about the individual. For the individual, whether they are affected or unaffected by that phenomenon, remains a 50 percent chance. How is it possible that the woman believes that her autonomy, personality, and individuality is the result of a decision based on probability supervised by a counselor? Only a society that has killed the common sense can arrive at this point. I have seen that the Council of Europe has granted 172 million euros for genetic research to protect the European genome as the basis of Europe's dignity!⁹

I return to the theme. Under consultation, you must make the decision based on a probability. A probability is calculated based on a population. This introduces the concept of risk. No new danger is identified by this information. The danger has always existed. Risk - a fundamentally mathematical and statistical concept - today awaits not only people like the father of the family who has insurance, but also the student who goes to the student advisor to choose if he must take mathematics or languages.

Let's go back to the question. Ivan, with his friends, wants to make thinkable and criticizable the idea that the central danger to be overcome in the use of communications is

9 Illich slaps his forehead in amazement.

not their content, the access to produce them, or to use them as industrial products. [Instead], Ivan and his friends want to make credible that the intensity of dependence on communication extinguishes the sovereignty which is rooted in the corporeal senses. The senses are critically verified by the common sense for what is good, in opposition to what is of value. For this reason, and for me at least and for my friends, communication destroys the possibility to believe that peace today is my responsibility, that I can make peace flower in a group with whom I meet face to face, that peace is based on conspiracy —on the creation of a hospitable atmosphere, the hospitable atmosphere.

Therefore, reflection on the renunciation, as much as possible, of exposing oneself to communication because [of its danger] to each individual, is one of the most important topics to discuss in a group — which seems to me the activity, the principal activity for Aldo and this beautiful group formed here in Lucca.

Thank you for your patience.