



Hermine—the unserved life

by Reimer Gronemeyer

Hermine has only one tooth left. She was born in 1916—so today, in April 2024, she is 108 years old. She wonders why she has kept this tooth. She lives in Namibia, where she is a living example of an existence before, alongside, and outside a service society. She was given the name “Hermine” a long time ago by the white government—the original name with its clicking and snapping sounds was a tongue-twister for the white-dominated administration. That is why she was quickly named “Hermine.”

My visit to her in April 2024 demonstrates that the excessive service society to which we central Europeans have become accustomed is a special case in human history. Hermine’s household shows the beginning and the end of this peculiar society. To us visitors, Hermine in her hut appears like a special case of human existence. But as a matter of historical fact, it is we who are the special case, while Hermine represents the ordinary, everyday human form of existence, still dominant among the eight billion people on the planet. Most people on the planet have only peripheral contact with the service society. Hermine cannot afford it; it does not exist for her, and, surprisingly, it turns out to be something that she does not need. The long tentacles of this service society are visible in the children’s hole-ridden T-shirts (golden hearts on what used to be a white background, for example), which have ended up on their backs from the mountains of disposed industrial clothing. Hermine’s hut is in a stony desert, somewhere between Uis and Khorixas in Namibia, and made from rusty pieces of tin, wood, clay, plastic sheeting, and car tires.

Hermine and her hut of waste symbolize a way of living that is the norm for most people. Hermine turns us serviced humans into a strange special case that made a surprising appearance in the history of human beings, perhaps only to disappear again, just as surprisingly.

Hermine’s tooth symbolizes an existence that does not ask what could be, but what is. No prosthesis and no implant are up for debate, but the tooth that has remained raises questions. Everything in this hut, from the dusty green plastic bottle to the red plastic sunglasses, comes from the rubbish of the throwaway society. This hut looks like a terminal moraine where the rivers of consumer waste have washed up.

Old Hermine, who suddenly begins to sing and clap her hands, is surrounded by her children, her grandchildren, and her great-grandchildren. Two puppies lie between her feet. Hermine embodies the memory of another, almost vanished world. At the beginning of her life, she was part of a nomadic group that fed on wild honey and whatever grew in the forest. Later, she lived off goats and cows. She makes her own fire and her own food, walking is difficult for her, but her face is characterized by calm, the lines of toil, and cheerfulness. Plastic beads are sewn onto her blue T-shirt, probably to suggest the outlines of skyscrapers.

It is as if Hermine is poking fun at the madness of the metropolitan world. She does not really do that, but on her T-shirt, the picture of Manhattan or Frankfurt appears absurd and ludicrous. Hermine has never seen a school or a doctor, her food is simple, and she does not know of running water or electricity. She has not seen the world. Her world is here. Through her sheer presence, she makes it clear that this life is enough and that she does not have thoughts of help, development, or progress. Hermine does not need services, and you probably could not even make her dependent on services anymore.

This becomes unmistakable in the encounter with

Hermine and the tooth: The history of Homo sapiens is a history before, alongside, and without the presence of services. One could say that the idea that humans can be plied with “services” is a late thought that may only have emerged when humans were taking their last breath. Homo sapiens appeared in Africa roughly 300,000 years ago, and the first stone tools, mainly hand axes, date from this time.¹ The Chauvet Cave, discovered in 1994, is in the Ardèche River valley. Stunningly beautiful rock carvings dating back more than 30,000 years were discovered there. If the history of human civilization were plotted on a 12-hour clock, the era of services—given the 300,000 years of human life— would only appear in the final seconds of this cultural clock.

This allows a clear view. We cannot imagine a world without services. Yet more than ninety-nine percent of the time in which humans have existed, they did so without the use of such things. The end of the age of services may frighten us, but the unserved life has always been the predominant way of life for us humans.

Corruptio optimi quae est pessima:
the relevance of Illich
in a time of exacerbating civilizational crisis
by Carlos Tornel*

On October 19 and 20, 2023, a group of friends¹ gathered at the Cristobal Colon University in the city of Veracruz, México, to discuss the work of Iván Illich and the continuing relevance of his thought. *Is Illich’s diagnosis of industrial society still valid? Are the tools he proposed still useful? and what would he say today in the face of a deepening civilizational crisis?* Very much in the spirit of Illich’s *science by people*—a mode of inquiry that moves outside the interests of the market and works towards creating convivial possibilities among people, we convened around a table, sharing ideas, food, and drink. We revisited Illich’s work as a source of critical thinking to address such pressing issues as climate change, green capitalism, and the post-COVID-19 world shaped by a generalized state of exception from democratic decision-making. We became convinced that Illich’s critique of modern institutions remains pertinent for an age marked by ever-growing scarcity and alienation. Exploring the possibility of reclaiming conviviality given contemporary capitalism is crucial to constructing a *pluriverse*—a world where diverse realities can coexist—as the Zapatistas argue. This article explores Illich’s critique of modernity, institutionalization, and the concept of scarcity. It discusses how contemporary institutions perpetu-

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¹ Max Planck Society: Homo sapiens is older than we thought, mpg from 7 June 2017 (last visited on 20 April 2024)