

## The Two Lives of Ivan Illich

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**The French literary magazine *Esprit* evaluates the work of Ivan Illich. It first focuses on his denouncing the perverse effects of industrial society. It also analyzes the symbolic effects of the system of modern technology. Despite the thematic and methodological eclecticism of the two periods in his life, there is one central preoccupation that runs throughout, that of man and his autonomy.**

“Ivan Illich and his relevance today”, *Esprit* n°367, August-September 2010.  
Contributions from Denis Clerc, Barbara Duden, Silvia Grünig Iribarren, Thierry Paquot, Jean Robert, Silja Samerski, Sajay Samuel.

The article examines the work of Ivan Illich retrospectively, in an attempt to highlight its modern qualities and the way in which he draws our attention to the multiple crises (economic, social, environmental etc.) that pervade today's world. But the article focuses above all on the second part of Illich's intellectual life, when he was a much less familiar figure to the public, from the 1980's up until his death in 2002. After his 1970's 'pamphlets' against the counter-productivity of developments in technology, and his retirement from public life, the author of *Tools for Conviviality* dedicated himself for almost half a century to the analysis of the symbolic effects of the modern system of technology and to examining the hypotheses that our modern convictions are based on.

The case put forward by *Esprit* is an excellent introduction to an often neglected part of his work, and draws from a text by Denis Clerc on the topic of counter-productivity, its use in the social sciences and its limits, taken from three unedited French texts from Ivan Illich himself and several further articles on theories put forward by Illich later in his life and written by his friends and colleagues who accompanied him along his intellectual journeys (Jean Robert, Barbara Duden, Sajay Samuel, Silja Samerski). The articles, as well

as a text by Silvia Grünig Iribarren on the art of living according to Illich, stem from a conference organized by Thierry Paquot and Jean Robert in May 2009 at the Paris Institute of Urbanism. These texts are also accompanied by an abstract of all further contributions from and on Illich to have been published in *Esprit* since 1967, as well as an introduction full of references bearing witness to the vivacity of Illichian thinking still present today. (See the *Œuvres complètes* in two volumes published by Fayard in 2003 and 2005).

### **A Career Spanning Two Eras**

Ivan Illich's intellectual career is most often divided into two parts, one from 1951 until 1979, a period which he referred to as that of his 'pamphlets', and the other spanning from 1980 up until his death. This disruption in the Austrian thinker's itinerary can be equated with an epistemic 'landslide', which he felt took place at the turn of the 1980's and which represents the turning point for the apparent change in his thinking (see introduction by Thierry Paquot and Jean Robert.) However, while never tempted to declare his previous theories invalid, this new way of looking at history did push him to a process of self-criticism whereby he himself pointed to insufficiencies in his ideas. The second part of his work corresponds to a radicalisation of Illichian criticism, radicalisation in the sense that it delves deeper into the etymology, the underground social influence of techniques, the consequences of using scientific vocabulary in everyday life, and into the origins of what the younger author of conviviality referred to as the 'radical monopoly', otherwise known as the dominance of one type of product over an entire section of human activity, to the extent that individuals forget that other methods are possible. (*Convivialité [Tools for Conviviality]*, Seuil, 1973, p. 79.) In the second part of the work we find the same, albeit differently presented, omnipresent anxiety over autonomy and integrity of the individual, and the desire not to reduce people, men and women of the real world, to linguistic and statistical abstractions.

### **Counter Productivity**

During the first half of his life, Ivan Illich dedicated himself in his best-known books (*Deschooling Society* (1971), *Energy and equity* (1973), *Tools for Conviviality* (1973), *Medical nemesis* (1975)), to developing criticism of industrial society by showing that its systems of public services, education, transport, and medicine, defeat their own purposes beyond a certain point. School robs the student of the desire and ability to learn

by himself, roads hinder traditional forms of transport such as going by foot or by bike, and hospitals create more illnesses than they cure. This is the crux of his theory of counter-productivity. But the most serious point he makes is that these institutions render the individual incapable of controlling his own life or of solving his own problems through simple accessible means and on his own terms, forcing him instead to always seek expert knowledge elsewhere. Put simply, industrial society engenders heteronomy and alienates those women and men who oppose it. This is not the case for all technical systems, but what is important is that the balance between autonomy and heteronomy should be respected. I might not build my bicycle myself, but I am capable of riding it and repairing it without being instructed how to do so. In this example, there is a positive synergy between my tool and I, otherwise referred to as conviviality. A car, on the other hand, not only imposes its law on the driver, but also a certain conception of time and space. It assumes an elaborate road network, external energy and economic capability but, beyond that, it actually wastes more time than it saves.

Illich's earlier criticism nevertheless goes no further than a concrete analysis using technical and economic language (for example, in *Energy and equity* he talks in terms of marginal utility.) It concentrates almost exclusively on the *action* of objects, if we are to use Jean Roberts expression, and barely touches upon what they *say*, and any symbolic effects they might have (p. 63) This was to become his strength in the later years of his life.

### **Out of Touch with Real Life**

The 'landslide' that Ivan Illich points to in the course of history and which has its turning point at the 1980's is what he refers to as the progression from 'the age of tools' to 'the age of systems' (Jean Robert p. 165). The system indeed derives from that category of objects which, unlike the tools, are no longer clearly distinct from their user. Illich here is not referring to what we would today call biotechnology, but to the technology of information, which renders the individual both a user *and* a part of the system, and which in turn diminishes yet further the individual's autonomy. Furthermore, modern man is caught in the dross of scientific and technical language, which reduces him to an abstraction, to a faceless entity caught in the discussions of engineers and planners, an ideal prototype that bears no direct relation to the men and women of everyday life. Worse still, the individual himself conforms to this role and contributes to make him out of touch

with real life. With his friend Uwe Pörksen, Illich depicts how “these plastic words sweep away reality’s resistance”, and unveil their “their sinister power of the disembodiment of men and of their ability to destroy the flesh of the world.” (Barbara Duden, p. 143) The world is henceforth thought of in terms of abstract scientific concepts and constructions detached from all real reference points, such as through diagrams and graphs, which increasingly pervade texts.

These reflections naturally signal a break, coming in the form of self-criticism, with his past research, which itself borrowed terms from science and other various institutions. Ivan Illich “had understood that it was not from technology and institutions that we had to free ourselves but rather from the representations and ways of seeing things that they generate.” (p. 156).

This change in orientation manifested itself through a radical change in research methods. Putting aside criticism of technology and economy, Illich took on the role of historian and linguist, tracking down the convictions that scientific vocabulary generates or the social conditioning which results from the slow modification of everyday objects such as the text. Thus, in the discourse on bioethics, we see him study the advent of his ‘nominal life’ with Dirk von Bötticher (p. 140), that is to say, the use of the word ‘life’ in the nominal, where it does not refer to the beings who live it. The term ‘a life’, disembodied and without reference to reality, was actually a new addition to the medical vocabulary of the 1980’s. Previously, one would speak of a living man, a living animal, or at most, of ‘life’ in general, but never of ‘a life’, an abstract idea which would from that point onwards be defended as the ultimate value of bioethics. He goes through a similar process of questioning with Silja Samerski on the effects of the statistical nature of risk evaluation in medicine, and of its relevance to real people, when everything is attributed to a “theoretical case; never to a ‘me’ or to a ‘you’.”(Silja Samerski, p. 209). But beneath this break with past methodology and this radicalisation in his criticism of modernity, there lies a thematic consistency that maintains remarkable continuity with the body of his work. There are even parallels which emerge rather clearly between the two periods of his intellectual life. He moves from criticism of school and education, to history of the text and of its transformation from the 13<sup>th</sup> century up until its technological form on computers; criticism of medicine becomes the history of the body and analysis of concepts of

bioethics; criticism of transport becomes the history of technological paradigms, from Hugues de St-Victor (12<sup>th</sup> century) to today, with commentary on the notion of energy or reflections on the art of living and on the relationship that man has with his territory. *Esprit* thus brings us on a journey through the erudite universe of the second Illich, a journey where the reader repeatedly and constantly encounters the same figure at the bend in each road, that of the man or woman from the real world, the person made of flesh, whose disappearance under assault from the abstract individual of contemporary institutions Illich so feared. Despite the thematic and methodological eclecticism of the two periods of Ivan Illich's life, the one overriding preoccupation with man and his autonomy remained.

### **Reflections from an Outmoded Thinker**

As for the issue of whether or not Ivan Illich is still relevant today, a question which forms the title of the dossier *Esprit* devotes to him, the contemporary use (and misuse) of the concept of counter-productivity, as described by Denis Clerc, as well as the fact that themes such as bioethics, energy, the role of experts, criticism of science, etc, continue to be the focus of discussion, would suggest that his ideas continue to bear relevance. One such example is a beautiful text by Illich, printed at the end of the article, on the history of the term 'energy' in terms of it being a concept of theoretical physics and a social object. For Illich, the ascendance of the word 'energy' in contemporary language, associated with that of 'work', marks the birth of a new concept of nature and of the emergence of the modern individual defined by need. From the moment when work and energy are elevated to the rank of fundamental need, there is nothing left to oppose the reign of the 'ecocrat' (p. 225) who, not content with organising men and institutions, extends his power to all of nature, which is considered a reserve of energy to be used by man. And once the goal becomes to extract the maximum from our natural energy resources, the loss in autonomy becomes apparent, since human action remains bound to the law of demand and supply, motivated by need. Illich's contribution, to an era when debate on energy management is ever-present, lies in the fact that he pushes us to question once more the convictions which stem from terms taken as unquestionable evidence.

Similarly, by criticising developments in science brought about under the form of research and development, the Austrian thinker invites us to think about its purpose. Should science be confiscated by experts from big institutions who then deliver it 'for

people', at the risk of it being held captive by other logic (economic, military etc.) or should science be practised 'by people' (p. 165 and following pages), surely the only way of maintaining minimal autonomy? This question proves its own pertinence and contemporary relevance by the simple fact that, to take but one example, numerous farmers from many different countries are today being held captive by a seed market controlled by a small number of large companies, with the resulting loss of an incalculable variety of plants patiently selected by the farmers themselves.

One of the main merits of this special issue on Illich is thus its successful depiction of both the break in the Illichian train of thought and the coherence of the whole, while also shedding light on certain problems which remain among the most pressing of our day. It would perhaps have been useful to include some context around Illich's journey of thought, such as a reminder of the historical events which were able to leave their mark on his thoughts and evocation of his intellectual ancestry, and his anxiety of the destruction of the private person as seen also in the work of Jacques Ellul. In bringing together these texts, *Esprit*, with help from Thierry Paquot and Jean Robert, provides an interesting contribution to spreading this surprisingly neglected intellectual's thinking given how original and visionary his theses were.

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