

Introduction, Vol. II, No. 1

The legacy of Ivan Illich is indeed a strange one. As a friend pointed out to me recently, even those on the Right¹ can claim Illich as an intellectual hero who stood against big government and fiscal folly. But what does it mean when *The American Conservative* (co-founded by Patrick Buchanan) now lauds Illich as a great, lost intellectual forefather?² In a sense the author of *The American Conservative*'s February, 2010 article entitled, "The People's Priest," Chase Madar, is correct: Illich was anti-government and ardently against state building projects. Yet, what the Right's transmogrification of Illich's legacy does not recognize is the fact that Illich was very much invested in a development project. Just not one that centered on property rights and institutional power, but rather the moral worth of every person. You see what is strange about a selective celebration of Illich by some on the Right is that you can't have a libertarian political intervention or future without a corresponding reinvestment (what Debord called "*détournement*") of the social forces now being corralled headlong into all-manner of global neoliberal complexes of power. That is, Illich can't properly be hailed as a forgotten ideological saint who championed the dissolution of big government and the growth of corporate-state services while not also recognizing that he stood for something else, an alternative to modern society as Illich would put it. It is this other aspect of Illich's legacy that I take exception to in Madar's rendition of an Illich revival by the Right: Illich was quite clear as to what an alternative to a modern capitalist society should look like and while he may have broken bread on occasion with Jerry Brown he would never do so with Pat Buchanan or those who think the need to conserve the cultural commons is equivalent to pulpit pounding on behalf of the Sons and Daughters of the American Revolution and other traditions based upon preserving a history of white supremacy. If Illich at times openly fought with Freire, he did not then by default approve of E. D. Hirsch. If the National Organization of Women found Illich's views on gender offensive, it did not mean that he was one step away (his views on government notwithstanding) from an appointment in the Reagan administration as its Czar on Family Values.

Illich was/is an extraordinary wildcard to a system that is one-dimensional in its party approach to political representation—one is either a Democrat or Republican—in which the status quo always prevails regardless. *Tools for Conviviality*, for instance, one of Illich's earliest attempts at working through alternatives to notions of modern industrial progress, stands for a society whose culture is not one that is based on the value structure of the commodity and the market. In other words, convivial society for Illich means a rejection of modern apparatuses of control and management such as the World Bank and IMF that peddle development projects

¹ This is not the place for detailed analysis of where *The American Conservative* or the author of its article on Illich fit on the political spectrum. It should be noted that the magazine claims to be the mouthpiece for conservatives in a "post-Right" world. In taking stands, albeit for financial reasons and not moral ones, against war and the corporatization of individuals' lives, *The American Conservative* is not congruent with the policy formation of the previous Bush administration, on the one hand, and much of the "news" that pours forth from other Rightist organs such as Fox or *The Weekly Standard*. Still, a careful examination of many of the contributors to the magazine will find a who's who of many political insiders on the Right of the last thirty-odd years (as well as some others of more politically ambiguous persuasions), and my argument would be that the Right is not a definitive ten-point plan that all ascribe to but rather a dynamic hegemony that is built out of various factions that come into alliance around certain sets of agreement. Thus, *The American Conservative* reaches out to a particular segment of the Right's base, just as does Glenn Beck, Rush Limbaugh, Bill O'Reilly, Sean Hannity, William Kristol, and so on.

² Chase Madar, "The People's Priest: Ivan Illich Understood the Dangers of Trying to Save the World" *The American Conservative*, February 1, 2010.

based on property rights and an overall ethic of privatization. Yet Illich's understanding of the commodity society was not solely a Marxist one—it also extended Marx's critique of capital beyond the limits of the worker, the colony, and the factory. Illich was one of the first to see that what also came along with the commodity society was not just the dehumanization of people; there was also a pernicious myth of progress that was locked into even Marx's critique of industrial capitalism. In this sense, if we can thank Marx for teaching us about the ways in which the ruling elite and experts work feverishly to convince us of the greatness of the virtues of their vision of a society built upon human exploitation, then we have Illich to thank for calling into question the idea that modern progress, even when harnessed for use on behalf of a socialist or communist society, is perhaps a path better not taken.

It is this aspect of Illich's critique of modern society that we must never lose sight of, his recognition of the fact that being anti-government and anti-state also means being for people, but not the atomistic individual (who is assumed to be, ideologically at least, a white, property-holding male) that the Right would like to read into Illich's work. Nor does Illich's critique of behemoth structures of power such as the church, school, medical system, or interstate freeway suggest that these models of modern progress are worth keeping around even if they are under the management of more enlightened folks. Illich thus does offer an alternative society in his work that is not just built around a blind faith in people, it is a faith also rooted in values that affirm human scaled, autonomous, and convivial forms of life that are in balance with each other and the larger regional ecology of which they are a part. Herein lies perhaps Illich's greatest teaching that a selective understanding of Illich such as Madar's leaves out: the basis to any convivial society should be one that recognizes limits to growth *and* celebrates the regenerative power of the commons to derive forms of culture in which people are less dependant and servile to big systems and their tools of domination.

The current issue of the IJIS comprises a snapshot of that which might comprise such an alternative society. In the range of articles from this issue that take up different aspects of Illich's work and legacy, we have a more accurate picture of what Illich's critique of modern society really entailed. From the desertification of Canadian fisheries, to autonomous feminist political movements in Southern Mexico, to Illich's own falling out with the Vatican, a revision of school curriculum as a site for ecological re-establishing ecological balance and sanity, and a powerful play on the shadow of institutional life, I am proud to offer this issue as a truer measure of the work of Illich and the vision it puts forth. As Illich never offered a pre-designed plan to alternative models of social life to the modern industrial one, these articles offer a multitude of points of departure for thinking about that other aspect of Illich's work that was always searching for spaces of renewal.

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