

Stari otac, moy brat<sup>1</sup>

Gene Bazan

Three books catapulted me out of the university by the mid-1970s: Herman Hesse's *Magister Ludi*, Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, and Ivan Illich's *Deschooling Society*. Each of these was given to me by students, sensing before I did that my destiny ought to lie elsewhere.

Over the next several years I would come across Illich's writings, usually in Stewart Brand's "Co-Evolution Quarterly." It was a stroke of cosmic luck for me that his and my paths crossed. I have Rustum Roy, chair of the old STS program at Penn State, to thank for bringing Ivan to Penn State.

On me, Illich practiced a kind of intellectual jiu jitsu – that is, leading me gently in directions I was already leaning.

One of these directions was living outside modern institutions, which in every case have become destructive, repressive, and corrupt. In one discussion about markets, Ivan suggested I look at Karl Polanyi's *Trade and Markets in the Early Empires*, which sharpened my perceptions of what markets are and do. Better known is Polanyi's *The Great Transformation*, an earlier work which showed how the shapers of modern institutions ripped subsistence out from under the 99% of the occupiers of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and turned them – and then us – into drones. I have striven to recover some measure of subsistence in my own life, and I hope I've passed along Ivan's gift by helping others do likewise, first with Penn State's Center for Sustainability and now through Neo-Terra.<sup>2</sup>

A second vista Illich opened for me centered on those key concepts that have come to define modernity. Here Illich used Ludolf Kuchenbuch's metaphor of walking backwards in time until the certainties of our western modernity fade and then ... disappear. The screen of our computer disappears into the page, the page into the word, and the word into speech. I have been a fan of words since, at 16, I read a dictionary from cover to cover, but it was Illich who pointed out that the word was merely one stage in a stream of modern development.

With *Deschooling*, Illich helped me understand how to think differently. He instructed me in the art of unpacking words. One of his protégés, Wolfgang Sachs, who I came to admire

greatly, unpacked the term “development” in his 1992 book, *The Development Dictionary*. He helped me understand my own work experiences in Yugoslavia, Ghana and Turkey. By dissecting the term “sustainability” in his next book, *Global Ecology*, Wolfgang shaped my thinking and action when a group of us started the Center for Sustainability at Penn State.

Which brings me to the third move in Illich’s jiu jitsu – his magical conviviality. Is there anyone here this evening who was present the night a magician stopped by Ivan’s ashram on Sparks Street? David Abram, who had wanted to meet Ivan, performed magic tricks with a coin as he regaled us with tales of his trips to visit shamans and healers in different cultures, out of which David wrote, *The Spell of the Sensuous*.<sup>3</sup>

Doubtless, all of us have watched one talk show or another; hung out with strangers at a bar or professional meeting; partied with friends. But until I went to the first Illich weekend consultation on Sparks Street, I thought convivial was just a fancy word for having a good time. He, and his band of brainy minstrels, taught me different. Discourse – not mere talk! Collaboration! Exploration! Plus good food, wine, and music.

In *Tools for Conviviality*<sup>4</sup> Illich treats the barriers to conviviality, one of which is radical monopoly. What was at first only accessible to the few, became obtainable for many, until it finally became so necessary that none could do without. That, in a nutshell, is radical monopoly. Cars, with their unacknowledged shadow work, drove out walking and bicycling. Health care drives out caring. And education drives out our own unfettered exploration of the world around us. The autodidact becomes suspect.

On the radical monopoly that is transportation I remember reading, in city planning school in the late sixties, that the average speed of transport in Manhattan was 4 mph. This is a speed of brisk walk. Years passed, and then I came across Ivan’s elegant calculation transmogrifying the majesty of a car to that same brisk walking speed. By the time I was 60, I had worn out three bicycles and clocked more than 60,000 miles. I did the first 30,000 on my own, but Ivan kept me going for the next 30 thousand!

When I met Ivan in the late 1980’s I was close to abandoning a lucrative line of economic development consulting. My take on that line of work, it turned out, was based on reasoning put forth by Jane Jacobs in her book, *The Economy of Cities*. Jacobs was a famous urban activist, first in NYC and later in Toronto. She wrote a path-breaking book in the early sixties which I read in urban planning school titled, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Here she

exposed the dark underbelly of urban renewal. Her next book, *The Economy of Cities*, addressed what became known as the rustbelt. For her, the solution was “import substitution,” that is, reclaim the economic base of a city by making locally what you find yourself importing. Since I was involved in rustbelt renewal, I glommed onto her solution without giving it the critical thought I had given economic base theory in graduate school. What I had failed to do was get to the core issue.

So how do we get to the core issues? The driving functions of a gnarly problem? I recall the weekend consultation on Sparks Street where the Illich tribe hosted a group of humanist economists, headed up by Mark Lutz, who had just published a book titled, *Humanist Economics*. The Friday evening socializing was great, but the Saturday session was fraught with tension. The climax, for me, came when Jean Robert, one of the Illich core, summarized the entire model of humanist economics by recalling B.F. Skinner’s behaviorism. Skinner developed theories and methods for shaping behavior by linking desired behaviors with rewards. He used pigeons as subjects and food pellets as rewards.

Jean Robert commented that humanist economics did not escape the essential condition of modern economics. “First,” he said, “you have to starve the pigeon.” Of course, this is what Polanyi outlined in *The Great Transformation*. To get peasants to work in factories, you have to first starve them by denying their subsistence. This is what the enclosures of the 17 and 1800’s did. Jean Robert’s phrase got to the core of modern economics and delivered its coup de grace.

Out of Illich’s insights, and the insights of his protégés and associates, I came to develop my own intellectual jiu jitsu.

THANK YOU IVAN!! Thank you Jean Robert! Thank you Wolfgang!

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Notes:

1. My father, my brother. Among his many languages, Ivan spoke Serbo-Croatian. As I had earlier spent a year there, I was still able to speak a few words with him.

2. [www.neo-terra.org](http://www.neo-terra.org)

3. Excerpt at <http://www.primitivism.com/ecology-magic.htm>

4. Text for *Tools for Conviviality* at:  
[http://www.mom.arq.ufmg.br/mom/arq\\_interface/3a\\_aula/illich\\_tools\\_for\\_conviviality.pdf](http://www.mom.arq.ufmg.br/mom/arq_interface/3a_aula/illich_tools_for_conviviality.pdf)

### **Author's Bio**

Gene Bazan has spent a large part of his last 30 years working with educational, environmental, civic and business organizations here and abroad on projects, funding, and board and staff development. Dr. Bazan has taught at three universities, in the U.S. and abroad. At Penn State, he helped create the Center for Sustainability and design the first Projects in Sustainable Living course. He has given numerous workshops, talks and tours in Central Pennsylvania on organic gardening since 1998. His university training is in Electrical Engineering & Economics, and his Ph.D. is in City & Regional Planning. Please see <http://www.neoterra.org/Pages/default.aspx> for more information about Gene's current projects.