

Illich Beyond Illich: Convivial Tools for Illichean Readings
A Rejoinder to UCLA's 2003 Roundtable on Illich

Engin Atasay and Gregory N. Bourassa

In his classic text, *Tools for Conviviality*, Ivan Illich offers a devastating critique of industrial society and conceptualizes the possibility of new modes and relations of being that would characterize a politics of conviviality—one based on communal creativity and a reconstruction of democratic ethics. Such a radical new politics, which entails an “inversion of present institutional purposes,” would rely upon the use of convivial tools, or tools that achieve in enabling “creative persons to meet their needs both as producers and as users.”¹ These convivial tools, Illich argues, are “intrinsic to social relationships” and can offer new alternative visions to industrial existence.² Yet far from offering a blueprint or “engineering manual” for the design of a new society, Illich points readers to the unwritten potentiality residing within such a society characterized by the autonomous use of tools as means.³ For Illich, this entails creating contexts where “the public learns to value the potential of a convivial society over the illusion of progress.”⁴ Here, Illich suggests that recognition of the value of such tools and their indeterminate potential “could generate a new flowering of surprises far beyond anyone’s imagination and hope.”⁵ Thus Illich invites readers to ponder the horizons of possibility that await us when we develop a politics of conviviality and attain autonomous control over our tools.

What is perhaps most provocative, then, about Illich’s conception of convivial tools is their expansive and enabling tendencies.⁶ Convivial tools allow users to creatively devise means that address their particular and self-determined needs. In this way, convivial tools are expansive as opposed to being restricted by a monopolized “production process” which “exercises an exclusive control over the satisfaction of a pressing need.”⁷ For Illich, this “production process”

¹ Ivan Illich and Etienne Verne, *Imprisoned in the Global Classroom* (London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, 1976), 30.

² Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 21.

³ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶ The practical significance of such enabling tendencies has recently been emphasized in an elaboration of Illich’s analysis of *institutional spectrum*. See Aysem Mert and Eleni Dellas, “Technology Transfer through Water Partnerships: A Radical Framework of Assessment for Legitimacy.” (Global Governance Working Paper No 42. Amsterdam et al.: The Global Governance Project, 2011).

⁷ Illich, “Tools for Conviviality,” 52.

constrains and exhausts the autonomous turn to the creative and productive dimensions of convivial tools. Whereas manipulative tools restrict by casting a monopoly that bars alternatives, convivial tools “foster conviviality to the extent to which they can be easily used, by anybody, as often or as seldom as desired, for the accomplishment of a purpose chosen by the user.”⁸ It is important to point out, as does Erich Fromm, that these are not merely a set of ideas for Illich, but rather a radical “approach” at the core of his vocation.⁹ Thus, there is always present in Illich a tendency to embrace the convivial horizon. With this, we can look to the construction of Illich’s texts to understand how this ethic of the convivial guided his own writing. That is, rather than following an instrumental approach of resonating with already available grammars, Illich sought to develop an unrestricted vernacular domain free from the constraints of ideological classification. In a similar vein, it can be said that Illich was theoretically and pedagogically nomadic, and edifyingly so, for his writing triumphantly rejected immutable theoretical categorizations and prefigured solutions. In short, we could say that his writing was an exercise in conviviality—a radical invitation to readers.

We suggest, then, that because convivial tools, for Illich, are necessary for political inversion, they also come to emblemize a pedagogical praxis that attends Illich’s writing. That is, Illich’s texts seem to take on the character of convivial tools. It follows then, that if Illich’s approach is one that pedagogically offers readers convivial tools, then Illich should also be engaged through a type of *Illichean reading* that seeks to recognize the potentiality within his texts. In sum, we find that Illich, in his writing, offers conceptual tools and ways of thinking that are meant to be expansive and appropriated by readers to meet their own particular needs. The use of such tools should always extend beyond mere critique and welcome the unforeseen potential, along with the already present energies, of convivial communities and events. Therefore an Illichean reading is a process whereby readers approach the text by asking *how they can use it* to autonomously pursue means that satisfy needs, which are also autonomously identified. In this sense, an *Illichean reading is a tactical reading that seeks to explore use-value, or perhaps more accurately, a convivial-value of the textual tools rather than a consumptive reading for the sake of consumption.*

⁸ Illich, “Tools for Conviviality,” 22.

⁹ Erich Fromm, “Introduction,” in Ivan Illich, *Celebration of Awareness: A Call for Institutional Revolution* (New York: Pantheon, 1970), 7.

With this said, it can be a rather challenging task to merely talk *about* Ivan Illich. That is, discussions about *who* Ivan Illich was or attempts to precisely ascertain *the essence* of his ideas will often be bounded if they are not inspired by a particular struggle or problematic. The preceding discussion featuring three of the most renowned figures in critical pedagogy, while thought provoking in myriad ways, ultimately encounters the limitations of theoretically indulging Illich in a context seemingly lacking political urgency. These limitations emerge as the dialogue attempts to cast Illich, challenging readers to playfully situate his thought on already plotted terrains of theory. For instance, Torres, Kellner, and McLaren contemplate Illich's Marxist sensibilities and consider how strands of his thought resonate with the Frankfurt School tradition. While many readers who enjoy the disciplinary enclosures of theory will find the discussion of such questions to be quite inadequate, it still may pique the interest of other readers. Yet, we want to contend that it is precisely these types of contrived inquiries and attempts to situate Illich—independent of a particular problematic—that highlight many of the difficulties, limitations and shortcomings of the academic “production process.”

Perhaps the point is that critical theorists should caution against the tendency to treat Illich and his ideas as if they are static entities to be abstractly grasped or conveniently stashed within an academic camp. In other words, striving to ascertain an essence of his ideas, or attempting to situate Illich within a particular tradition, in the end, obscures the potentiality that resides in his texts. Such endeavors ultimately reside within a consumptive economy that asks, “who is Ivan Illich and what are his ideas?” We wish to suggest that a tactical Illichean reading operates in an alternative convivial economy that asks, “what can we do with the tools offered by Illich?” The precise virtue of the latter question is its expansive orientation—an orientation that moves away from a restrictive expert society and affirms the potentiality and autonomy of the convivial.

The problem, then, with the preceding discussion is that Torres, Kellner, and McLaren were discursively placed in a constraining economy in trying to answer the question of who Illich was. While such discussions might arguably have their place, we find that they tend to close off more fruitful endeavors, namely Illichean readings that involve tactical methods of exploration, seeking new depths and zones of the convivial, ultimately displacing a dependency on that which is already established, monopolized and cartographically mapped. Moreover, a tactical Illichean reading starts with “politically interrelated individuals” within a vernacular and

concrete community.¹⁰ Whereas constrained readings tend to subordinate the political and conceal more than they reveal, a tactical Illichean reading sees the text as an open-ended tool and makes use of what is at hand in order to “enrich the environment with the fruits of his or her vision.”¹¹

In order to disrupt the academic “production process,” we propose approaching theoretical traditions as unstable terrains, perpetually evolving and always already transforming. Thus part of an Illichean reading entails treating texts, theories and practices as intrinsically and positively productive. For example, an Illichean reading of Freire is a reading that recognizes Freire’s ideas and practices as open-ended tools. The notion of *dialogue* plays a significant role in Freire’s critical pedagogy and his quest for introducing a new mode of reflection and praxis for the oppressed. For Freire, through dialogue, the oppressed acquires a new situation that he/she invents and reinvents through critical consciousness. Freire’s dialogue is dynamic and constantly reinvents reality. It requires people “to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming.”¹² Freire believes that the oppressed must discover that they are oppressed and, in order to achieve their liberation, critical dialoguers must address the world through a unified dialogue and action. This dialogue must be carried out in democratic solidarity and, in order to avoid becoming teleological, should not rely on a particular will. However, Freire’s notion of dialogue, which he initially advocated through rural communities in Brazil, was implemented too literally in contemporary urban education settings and became a rigid practical roadmap. Therefore, an Illichean reading of a Freirian dialogue may allow urban educators to *poach* useful tools from processes of dialogue; such as the notion of *love*, outlined by the preceding discussion, which for Freire “is at the same time the foundation of dialogue itself.”¹³

An Illichean reading of Freire—without being rooted in the theoretical underpinnings of Freire—can extract tools from dialogue, which can be utilized in expansive and enabling processes as tactical approaches for a convivial society. Such a society with an imminent potential for positively productive openings can defy the constraints of an already determined oppressed consciousness. As Fromm notes, the importance of Illich’s writings resides in the fact

¹⁰ Illich, “Tools for Conviviality,” xxiv.

¹¹ Ibid., 21.

¹² Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (New York: Continuum, 2000), 88.

¹³ Freire, “Pedagogy of the Oppressed,” 89.

that they “have a liberating effect on the mind by showing entirely new possibilities; they make the reader more alive because they open the door that leads out of the prison of routinized, sterile, preconceived notions.”¹⁴ To explore the horizons of the convivial, Illich asks us to focus “on the structure of tools, not on the character structure of their users.”¹⁵ What this entails is an expansive engagement with the analysis of industrialism, institutions and society in such a way that it utilizes tools to foster convivial existence that stems from a particular problematic. This enabling approach allows the Illichean reader to extract tools from other disciplines. The Illichean reader then becomes a rootless examiner of his/her conduct, theoretical conceptualizations and social relations under which he or she embraces a nomadic engagement with tools that enables the continual contestation and re-negotiation of multiplicities of disciplines.

Author Bios

Gregory N. Bourassa is a PhD candidate in the Department of Education, Culture and Society at the University of Utah. His interests are driven by the recognition that schools are important political and cultural sites that play a vital role in constituting and shaping subjectivities. His work promotes an educational life that explores possibilities where education meets an affirmative biopolitics.

Engin Atasay is a PhD candidate at the Department of Education, Culture and Society at the University of Utah. His research interests include examining the role of education within neoliberal discourses and its impact on emerging learning subjectivities. Atasay's work is also centered on processes of learning and knowledge production as areas of performance and improvisation as productive and positive potentialities for fostering progressive change.

¹⁴ Fromm, “Introduction,” 10.

¹⁵ Illich, “Tools for Conviviality,” xxiv.