

Thirteen Ways of Looking at Ivan Illich

Daniel Grego

*Ignem veni mittere in terram
et quid volo?
Si iam accensus esset!*
St. Luke 12:49

A friend of Ivan Illich's mother once said to her: "Why did you not have seven sons instead of one Ivan? It would be so much simpler for the world."¹

Prologue

[He] expresses throughout his faith in the capacity of ordinary people to construct for themselves a world suited to their inner needs, to create and participate in an advancing culture of liberation in free communities, to discover through their own thought and engagement the institutional arrangements that can best satisfy their deeply rooted striving for freedom, justice, compassion and solidarity, at a particular historical moment.²

In the passage above, Noam Chomsky is writing about the anarchist, Rudolf Rocker, but he might have been writing about Ivan Illich. Illich would have questioned Chomsky's use of the words "needs," "liberation," and "institutional," but he certainly had "faith in the capacity of ordinary people" and he certainly believed in "freedom, justice, compassion and solidarity" (although Illich might have substituted the word "friendship" for "solidarity"). If having this faith and these beliefs makes one an anarchist, then Ivan Illich was an anarchist.

¹ Francine du Plessix Gray. 1970. *Divine Disobedience*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, p. 282.

² Noam Chomsky. Preface to Rudolf Rocker. 1989. *Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory and Practice*. Oakland, CA: AK Press, p. iii.

Apparently, some educators (or educators of educators, or educators of educators of educators...once you start down this road, there is no end) believe that Ivan Illich's thought is best engaged by dismissing it as anarchistic, by which I would guess they mean unhelpful or unrealistic. These educators probably fall into one of two general categories. There are the pragmatists who believe the status quo schooling establishment and structure is here to stay and our task is to make the best of it. And then there are the socialists who imagine themselves enlightened enough to lead the rest of us (who all suffer from "false consciousness") to some better world in which schools, finally freed from the grip of corporate capitalism, will produce new generations of critical thinkers.³

Illich's defenders might be tempted to try to refute the charge that he was an anarchist, but, as the old saying goes: "If something walks like a duck..." The problem, as George Woodcock pointed out in his classic study of anarchism, is that:

To describe the essential theory of anarchism is rather like trying to grapple with Proteus, for the very nature of the libertarian attitude – its rejection of dogma, its deliberate avoidance of rigidly systematic theory, and, above all, its stress on extreme freedom of choice and the primacy of the individual judgment – creates immediately the possibility of a variety of viewpoints inconceivable in a closely dogmatic system.⁴

There are many species of birds dwelling in the canopy of the anarchist rain forest and, if he was nothing else, Ivan Illich was a rare bird. Francine du Plessix Gray wrote about Ivan back in 1970:

³ I've noticed that since the fall of the Soviet Union, this second group has toned down its rhetoric. They used to advocate for "The Revolution." Now, their aim is "critical democracy" or "critical consciousness."

⁴ George Woodcock. 1962. *Anarchism*. New York: The World Publishing Company, p. 17.

The public image of the mundane, astringent-witted scholar-priest shelters a Promethean variety of men. Illich is both tough and tender, guileful and ingenuous, devout and cynical. He is a flamboyant exhibitionist and profoundly modest. He is as radical in some domains as he is traditional in others. He is an arrogant aristocrat with a militant dedication to the poor. He is as diabolically sarcastic to his critics as he is loyal to his friends...Illich refuses to be categorized, and regales in being controversial.⁵

So, the whole idea of pigeonholing Illich should be questioned. I remember a disagreement between Lee Hoinacki and Barbara Duden, two of Ivan's dearest friends, at a memorial conference for Illich held at Pitzer College in the spring of 2004. Hoinacki advanced his idea that Illich was best understood as an apophatic theologian.⁶ But Barbara Duden, at whose home Ivan died on December 2, 2002, passionately responded that there was nothing to gain, and perhaps a great deal to lose, by putting Ivan into a box, any box. A caged bird cannot fly. And I believe to truly understand Illich, you have to be willing to soar with him a while.

I have to confess that when the controversy about whether or not Illich was an anarchist was brought to my attention, I laughed. I wanted to satirize the whole thing. I immediately recalled Hoinacki's and Duden's disagreement, the old joke about the blind men and the elephant, and also a poem by Wallace Stevens called "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird."

⁵ Francine du Plessix Gray. *Ibid*, p. 282.

⁶ *Apophatic* derives from the Greek word for "silent." Karen Armstrong notes: "Greek Christians came to believe that all theology should have an element of silence, paradox and restraint in order to emphasize the ineffability and mystery of God." Karen Armstrong. 1993. *A History of God*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, p. 401. I will discuss the differences between apophatic and kataphatic theology in section XI below.

In what follows, I have used the Stevens poem as a framework to examine the many facets of Ivan Illich. Stevens wrote in a letter to an editor that “Thirteen Ways” “is not meant to be a collection of epigrams or of ideas, but of sensations.”⁷ My reflections are only impressions and sensations, but that seems appropriate. Not only was Illich interested in the senses as a historian, but, from time to time, he relished being a bit of a sensation himself. At the end, I will return to considerations of Illich’s anarchistic tendencies.

At the onset, I want to apologize to Wallace Stevens for taking liberties with his poem and to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who already adopted this conceit to analyze attitudes toward black men.⁸ I also hope Ivan will forgive me. Something tells me he already has.

Among twenty snowy mountains,
The only moving thing
Was the eye of Ivan Illich.

Ivan Illich gave librarians and bookstore clerks fits. Where do you put his books? His work is not easily categorized. History? Yes, sometimes. Sociology? Perhaps. Education? Well, it depends on how that word is defined.

If I had to pick one label for Illich, I think I would choose philosopher in the original sense of “a lover of wisdom.” The mountains may have been snow covered, but Illich’s eye was always moving.

Within the Western philosophical tradition, where does he belong? He gave us the answer to this question. In his extended conversation with David Cayley for CBC Radio’s *Ideas* program, Illich, reflecting on the influence on his thought of the French

⁷ Holly Stevens, editor. 1981. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, p. 251.

⁸ Sorry, Skip. Perhaps, one day I’ll be able to share a beer with you at the White House and we can work it out.

philosopher, Jacques Maritain, said that Maritain's approach to the texts of St. Thomas Aquinas "laid the Thomistic foundations of my entire perceptual mode."⁹

Illich said this grounding allowed him to be intellectually free to examine not only the Western tradition, but also Asian and Islamic thinkers, as well.

II

I was of three minds,

Like a tree

In which there are three Ivan Illichs.

Illich was often called a cultural critic. His critique of the modern world was so sharp and so penetrating, some people thought of him as a prophet. I can understand that. I often think of his writings as prophetic.

However, Illich was also capable of subjecting his own ideas to ongoing criticism. He tells the story of becoming aware of the "unwanted side effects" the publication of *Deschooling Society* might have caused and of how Norman Cousins allowed him to publish a piece in the *Saturday Review*, which Illich considered "the main criticism" of his book.¹⁰

It seems that for every critique he offered, there were at least three Illichs perched in a nearby tree.

III

Ivan Illich whirled in the autumn winds.

He was a small part of the pantomime.

⁹ David Cayley. 1992. *Ivan Illich in Conversation*. Concord, Ontario: House of Anansi Press, p. 150.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 73.

One of Illich's favorite tools was sarcasm. He was a superb satirist. He hoped that with humor – always containing some sharp barbs – he could get people to smile away the certainties within which they lived.

He also believed in the pantomime of “horrified silence.”¹¹ There are some modern obscenities – nuclear weapons, for example – about which he felt the only possible response was to say nothing at all, as long as he could make his horror visible. He tried to avoid apocalyptic randiness in order to protect his heart. He whirled in the autumn winds.

IV

A man and a woman

Are one.

A man and a woman and Ivan Illich

Are one.

“Here we are, you and I, and, I hope, also a third who is Christ.” This passage from *De Spirituali Amicitia* by Aelred of Rievaulx was very important to Illich. Creating the occasions for friendship to flourish was central to his life and his life's mission. He told David Cayley:

I have seen it as my task to explore the ways in which the life of the intellect, the disciplined and methodical joint pursuit of clear vision – one could say philosophy in the sense of loving truth – can be so lived that it becomes the occasion for the kindling and growth of *philia*.¹²

¹¹ Ibid, p. 129.

¹² Ivan Illich and David Cayley. 2005. *The Rivers North of the Future*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press, p. 148. Illich used the Greek word *philia* “to avoid the funny implications of the word friendship in different modern languages.”

In fact, Illich went so far as to say: “My idea was that the search for truth presupposes the growth of *philia*.”¹³ John McKnight wrote:

In his later years, Ivan has focused on friendship as the beloved manifestation of our possibility. He has sought to define the conditions that allow, even nurture, this possibility. And we know that these include a place where surprise, mystery, and memory are at the heart of our discovery of each other.¹⁴

Just as a man and a woman are one, searching for truth, finding oneself in the eyes of one’s friends, and Ivan Illich are one.

V

I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
Ivan Illich whistling
Or just after.

Because Illich was fluent in so many languages (who really knows how many?) and I am not, it is difficult for me to gauge his gifts as a writer. His English prose was often stilted, but he was capable of writing passages of great beauty, especially when he drew upon his deep knowledge of history and mythology. I’m thinking particularly of his lovely essay “Rebirth of Epimethean Man” with which he concluded *Deschooling Society*. That essay ends:

We now need a name for those who value hope above expectation. We need a name for those who love people more than products...We need a name for those

¹³ Ibid, p. 151.

¹⁴ John L. McKnight. “On Ivan Illich and His Friends” in Lee Hoinacki and Carl Mitcham, editors. 2002. *The Challenges of Ivan Illich*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, pp. 50-51.

who love the earth on which each can meet the other... We need a name for those who collaborate with their Promethean brother in the lighting of the fire and the shaping of iron, but who do so to enhance their ability to tend and care and wait upon the other... I suggest that these hopeful brothers and sisters be called Epimethean men.¹⁵

This is beautiful both in its inflections and its innuendoes.

VI

Iceicles filled the long window

With barbaric glass.

The shadow of Ivan Illich

Crossed it, to and fro.

The mood

Traced in the shadow

An indecipherable cause.

Ivan Illich refused to be categorized. Quoting the Chilean bilingual poet, Vicente Huidobro, Illich would say: “Je suis un peu lune et commis voyageur.”¹⁶ (I am a bit moon and a bit traveling salesman.) He was a mestaclocan, a shape-shifter, whose shadow could only be seen through a glass, darkly.

He was a magician. In 1987, David Cayley tried to interview him as part of CBC Radio’s coverage of a conference in Toronto on orality and literacy. Cayley remembered:

¹⁵ Ivan Illich. 1971. *Deschooling Society*. New York: Harper & Row, pp. 115-116. In the ellipses, Illich inserted excerpts from the poem “People” by Yevgeny Yevtushenko.

¹⁶ Vicente Huidobro. 1925. *Tout a Coup*. Paris: Editions au sans Pareil. The line comes from poem #11.

I recorded the conversation in his room...I had checked the tape recorder before beginning the interview and monitored the recording throughout; but, when I put the tape on again, I discovered that it had nothing on it. Later in the day I approached Illich...He hinted that he had hexed the recording.¹⁷

For Cayley, this incident reinforced Illich's "magus-like" reputation. He was an indecipherable cause.

VII

O thin men of Haddam,
Why do you imagine golden birds?
Do you not see how Ivan Illich
Walks around the feet
Of the women about you?

One of Illich's early books was called *Celebration of Awareness*.¹⁸ A theme that runs through all of his work is that the institutions that dominate the modern world – schools, hospitals, transportation systems, the economy – all divert our attention away from what really matters: this moment, the person with whom you are conspiring (sharing breath), the light shining through the branches of the birch in the yard, the taste of the wine on your tongue.

Again and again, Illich asks us: "Why do you imagine golden birds when there are women about you?"

VIII

I know noble accents

¹⁷ David Cayley. 1992. Ibid, p. ix.

¹⁸ Ivan Illich. 1970. *Celebration of Awareness*. New York: Pantheon Books

And lucid, inescapable rhythms;
But I know, too,
That Ivan Illich is involved
In what I know.

Although Illich taught at a number of universities in Europe and the United States, his main teaching tool was not the lecture hall or the classroom, but the convivial table around which he shared food and wine and conversation with his friends. One could find there noble accents and lucid, inescapable rhythms. He took a great deal of pleasure in introducing people to each other in the hope of fostering friendships.

I can only speak for myself here, but I know that for the rest of my life, Ivan will be involved in what I know.

IX

When Ivan Illich flew out of sight,
He marked the edge
Of one of many circles.

Illich wrote his doctoral dissertation on Arnold Toynbee's philosophy of history. At the end of his life, Ivan wrote and spoke mainly as a historian. He said:

I study history in the way a necromancer goes back to the dead...I want – if it's possible at all and always knowing that it's like switching to a dream state – to find the dead again. A good necromancer knows how to make them come to life, but he knows how tempting they are. Therefore, he draws a circle around himself, a magical circle...I want those who are willing to study with me...to

move into the magic circle which is surrounded by the dead who for a moment come alive as shadows, as skeins.¹⁹

Illich used the perspective of history as a fulcrum to lever his students and readers out of their certainties. One of the many circles whose edge he marked was the magic circle of the dead.

X

At the sight of Ivan Illich
Flying in a green light,
Even the bawds of euphony
Would cry out sharply.

In modern Western society, someone is always trying to sell you something. The sales pitch is always delivered in dulcet tones and with seductive images. Illich saw these bawds of euphony for what they are: slave traders. He once wrote:

In a consumer society there are inevitably two kinds of slaves: the prisoners of addiction and the prisoners of envy.²⁰

Illich flew in a green light. When the hucksters and madams spotted him, they understood the threat of his sharp talons and so would cry out sharply.

XI

He rode over Connecticut
In a glass coach.
Once, a fear pierced him,
In that he mistook

¹⁹ David Cayley. Ibid, pp. 238-239.

²⁰ Ivan Illich. 1973. *Tools for Conviviality*. New York: Harper & Row, pp. 46-47.

The shadow of his equipage

For Ivan Illich.

When it comes to “God-talk” (theology), I think Lee Hoinacki was right to suggest that Illich was in the apophatic tradition. According to Alister McGrath, apophatic theology (or the *via negativa*) “stresses that we cannot use human language to refer to God, who lies beyond such language.”²¹ (Kataphatic theology, or the *via positiva*, which has been the more common tradition in the West, holds that positive statements about God can be made as long as the limits of human reason are taken into consideration.) Apophatic theologians try to approach the Divine Mystery by pointing out what it is Not.

In discussing Illich’s *Deschooling Society*, Hoinacki claims: “Those unfamiliar with the tradition of apophatic theology mistakenly view the book as only about schools.”²² What’s he getting at? I think his idea is that by exposing modern blasphemy (for example, the belief embedded in the ideology of schooling that humans can do what God cannot, that is manipulate others for their own salvation), Illich was engaging in the *via negativa*. He was showing us that our systems have become false gods; that we have succumbed to an idolization of our technique.

Traveling along the road with Illich, whether in Connecticut or anywhere else, could be dangerous and fearful for anyone who was trapped in the certainties that dominate modern ways of thinking.

XII

The river is moving.

²¹ Alister E. McGrath. 2007. *Christian Theology: an Introduction, Fourth Edition*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, p. 193.

²² Lee Hoinacki. “Reading Ivan Illich” in Lee Hoinacki and Carl Mitcham. *Ibid*, p. 1.

Ivan Illich must be flying.

Illich once said that it was his destiny to be a Christian pilgrim and a wandering Jew. From the time he closed CIDOC in 1976 until his death, he wandered the globe answering the call of his friends. He found his home in their eyes, in the food and wine they shared, and in the conversations around the table that covered an astonishing range of topics and that were conducted in many languages.

These friendly dialogues flowed like a river with Illich soaring overhead. He was always on the lookout – and invited his friends to look with him – for surprise and mystery.

XIII

It was evening all afternoon.

It was snowing

And it was going to snow.

Ivan Illich sat

In the cedar-limbs.

One thing is certain. Ivan Illich was a Christian. In fact, he was a monsignor of the Roman Catholic Church until the day he died.²³ Illich had his problems with the institution, “the church as it,” as he called it. He saw the institutional church as the origin of much he detested within modern Western society, summing up his view with the Latin phrase *corruptio optimi quae est pessima* (“the corruption of the best is the worst”). However, Illich remained loyal to “the church as she” for his entire life.

²³ Illich tried to keep the cleric separate from the public intellectual. However, I think to fully understand Illich, one has to know where he stood, the tradition out of which he came.

I have already mentioned that he attributed the architecture of his thought to his reading of St. Thomas Aquinas. Two passages from the New Testament were also particularly important for Illich: St Matthew 4:1-11 and St. Luke 10:25-37.

The verses from St. Matthew describe Jesus' fast in the desert and his temptation by the Devil. Finding Jesus exhausted and hungry after he had been fasting for forty days and forty nights, the Devil tempts him with three types of power: economic, psychological, and political. Jesus refuses all three. Illich believed that renouncing power was a critical part of The Way that Jesus revealed.

The passage from St. Luke contains the parable of the Good Samaritan. What Illich found so significant in the story was the freedom Jesus advocated to step outside of the traditional boundaries of one's ethnic group and to offer compassion to the other. Given the ethics of the ancient world, the Samaritan did not have any obligation to aid the Jew he found beaten up on the side of the road. Yet, he was moved to help him.²⁴

Perched in the cedar-limbs, Ivan Illich watched the snow. It was going to snow and there was nothing he could do about it. The model he accepted was the model of contingency in which God holds the world in His hands. While the flakes were falling, Ivan smiled. He may have been recalling the old Yiddish proverb: If you want to make God laugh, tell Him what your plans are.

Epilogue

²⁴ A scholar of political theory would notice in the renunciation of power and this embrace of personal freedom two of the tenets in most versions of anarchism, particularly the Christian anarchism associated with Leo Tolstoy and Dorothy Day. A recent study is Alexandre Christoyannopoulos. 2011. *Christian Anarchism: A Political Commentary on the Gospel*. Exeter, UK: Imprint Academic. The relationship between anarchism and biblical faith was also the subject of Jacques Ellul's *Anarchy and Christianity*, a book with which Illich was almost certainly familiar, probably in the original French edition published in 1988. Illich counted Ellul as one of his teachers. Jacques Ellul. 1991. *Anarchy and Christianity*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

So, was Ivan Illich an anarchist? If you qualify that label with the adjective “Christian,” I think he was. He certainly came to bring fire to the earth. But, Illich probably would have smiled at this whole discussion. He once told Madhu Suri Prakash that all of his writings could be thought of as a series of footnotes to Mahatma Gandhi’s work²⁵ and Gandhi often called himself an anarchist.²⁶ But when David Cayley asked Ivan about his friendship with Paul Goodman, an unapologetic anarchist, and whether or not Illich’s activities at CIDOC were mistaken because of such associations, he answered: “I never worried for what I was mistaken.”²⁷

Perhaps, in a hundred years, there will be apophatic Illichian scholars and others who are kataphatic. Some will point out his affinity for silence; others his quest for friendship and conviviality.

Instead of dismissing Illich’s critique of modern societies (particularly the institution of compulsory schooling) as anarchistic, we should ask ourselves whether or not Illich was right.²⁸ Is schooling a lottery that *inevitably* privileges a few, while, for the majority, it promotes a new kind of self-inflicted injustice? Is schooling the mythopoetic ritual of societies committed to progress, which is defined as the pursuit of unlimited

²⁵ Personal conversation.

²⁶ A concise discussion of the “anarchistic facets” of Gandhi’s philosophy is in Maia Ramnath. 2011. *Decolonizing Anarchism*. Oakland, CA: AK Press, pp.171-177.

²⁷ David Cayley. *Ibid*, p. 202. Robert Graham also noted Illich’s relationship with Goodman when introducing Illich’s essay “Political Inversion” for the second volume of his history of anarchism. Robert Graham, editor. 2009. *Anarchism: A Documentary History of Libertarian Ideas, Volume Two*. Montreal: Black Rose Books, pp. 441-466. Illich’s essay first appeared in Ivan Illich and Etienne Verne. 1976. *Imprisoned in the Global Classroom*. New York: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, pp. 25-56.

²⁸ In her book, *Anarchism and Education: A Philosophical Perspective*, Judith Suissa views Illich as “part of the anarchist tradition.” She qualifies this judgment by saying that Illich’s critique “leads to an emphasis on individual autonomy rather than on ideal forms of communality, suggesting possible theoretical tensions with the social-anarchist position.” Judith Suissa. 2010. *Anarchism and Education*. Oakland, CA: PM Press, p.153. I think Suissa confuses Illich’s refusal to offer prescriptions with a lack of interest in “communality.”

production and consumption of goods and services? Does schooling embed in the soul the myths that are necessary to live in a consumer society? Has education become “learning under the assumption of scarcity”?

If, as educators, we are concerned about the ends of economic justice and ecological health, we must try to answer these questions.²⁹ If we conclude Illich was right, then we should consider using his critique as a guide to imagine other, better possibilities. If others then wish to label us as anarchists, we should smile.

To the pragmatists who ignore Illich because they believe the schooling status quo is here to stay, I can only say I’m happy the abolitionists didn’t think that way about slavery, or that Gandhi didn’t think that way about British colonial rule, or that leaders of the American civil rights movement didn’t think that way about Jim Crow, or...

To the socialists who dismiss Illich as an anarchist, I suggest they consider reading his books again (or for the first time). They may discover the consciousness that is false is their own. Who knows what might happen then?

Daniel Grego

Wild Space Farm

Author’s Bio

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²⁹ Recently, I tried to get environmental educators to take up these questions. Daniel Grego. 2009. “A Critique of Schooling for Conservationists and Eco-theologians” in *Encounter*, Volume 22, No. 4, Winter, pp. 16-20.

www.transcenterforyouth.org.) One of his major interests is exploring the confluence of the ideas of Mahatma Gandhi, Ivan Illich, and Wendell Berry. He recently contributed essays to *A Whole Which is Greater: Why the Wisconsin "Uprising" Failed* edited by Paul Gilk and David Kast and to *Stay Solid: A Radical Handbook for Youth* edited by Matt Hern. He lives with his wife, choreographer Debra Loewen, the Artistic Director of Wild Space Dance Company (www.wildspacedance.org) on a small farm in the Rock River watershed in Dodge County, Wisconsin.

