

**Todd Hartch, The Prophet of Cuernavaca: Ivan Illich and the Crisis of the Modern West, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 256 pp. ISBN 978-0190204563**

**Reviewed by Gustavo Esteva**

How does the historian complete his history? Does he begin with a conclusion, a hunch, and proceed to collect evidence to support it? Or does he begin with evidence and critically read it to arrive at some provisional conclusion? Reading *The Prophet*, I suspect the former although I had hoped for the latter. What might have been an effort to bring to light Illich's critique of the modern West, instead appears as an inquisitorial search to collect 'proofs' of an in-existent crime for which the innocent defendant has been already condemned.

Perhaps, because Illich has been so important to me—as activist and author—that I respond as strongly as I do to conclusions I see as wrong. Or perhaps my response is understandable in that I see the implications for such erroneous conclusions to be a dismissal of a critique so necessary to our moment in history. Perhaps, neither of these. Ivan was my friend and perhaps I wish to set the record straight about his actions, as I observed and experienced them as one who knew him in the flesh.

Regardless, I return to my problems with Hartch's conclusions with the hope of demonstrating a fundamentally different interpretation of the "facts." Consulting archives, including those of the FBI file "Ivan Illich," the Archdiocese of Mexico City and several personal collections, Hartch opts for a very judgmental and dismissive picture of a man rather than an exploration of the ideas and deeds and the historical context that informed one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's most radical social critics.

Hartch's judgment includes a very "objective" characterization of his subject: "full time controversialist"; "cruel, proud, arrogant"; "hyperbolic"; "vitriolic"; "bombastic rethoric"; "lack of lucidity"...and many more adjectives of this kind. "Illich's ideas demand a certain amount of attention" (130), Hatch writes. Yes, the ideas of one of the most important thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, currently discussed all around the world, deserves "certain" attention!

In spite of the amazing documentation Hartch exhibits, he commits several factual mistakes. Two errors are particularly worth noting:

(1) "He kept a house in Cuernavaca for many years, traveled around the world to give seminars, and eventually settled down among a group of his friends in Bremen, Germany, where he died in 2002."

Ivan kept his house in Ocoatepec, Mexico until the end of his life. He spent in it more time than in any other place of the world since he settled down there. Every year, for many years, he came back to his home, for several months, after spending some time in State College, Pennsylvania, and in Bremen, Germany, where he died—when he had his luggage ready to fly to his home, in Ocoatepec, for the Christmas season of 2002. In other words, Illich never "settled down" in Bremen, Germany. Neither did he "keep a house" in Cuernavaca. Rather, his home was Ocoatepec, Cuernavaca, Mexico.

(2) "Centro Intercultural de Documentación ... founded in 1963 as part of CIF..."  
(xi); "In light of later statements by Illich that his center was a completely secular

organization, it is important to note that, in the very first organizational meeting of the CIF, the new center was clearly characterized as a response to the American bishops' encouragement to promote the training of missionaries for Latin America." (32); "As CIF evolved into the more secular CIDOC..."(66); "... a second "center" with a new and less religious name, the Centro Intercultural de Documentación (74); "Despite the change of venue and the more secular emphasis..." (113).

This interpretation of Hartch regarding the origins of both CIF and CIDOC is indeed a serious matter, revealing both his strategy and method. For him Illich created CIF as a religious organization and slowly secularized it, for his perverse and hidden purposes...and thus lied when he said that his center was a secular organization.

A correction of Hartch's flawed history is necessary. The Center for Intercultural Formation (CIF) was incorporated in the US on March 3, 1961, sponsored by Fordham University and several religious institutions. The Centro de Investigaciones Culturales, A.C. (CIC) was created in Cuernavaca and can be seen as an extension of CIF. But CIDOC is an entirely different story. It was never part of CIF or its creature. It was created on 25 October 1965 by José María Sbert Callao, Tarcisio Ocampo Villaseñor and Guillermo Floris Margadant, with a legal shape (asociación civil) that in the Mexican legislation offers the greatest secular autonomy (based in a 1888 law for liberal professions). None of the founders of CIDOC represented or was associated with any church or religious activities. CIDOC, as Illich stated, was a completely secular organization. It was not another CIF or an extension of CIF: it was conceived and

implemented as a radical departure from CIF. And it is indeed mysterious why Hartch considers the name Center for Intercultural Formation more religious than the name Centro Intercultural de Documentación. (It is mysterious...unless one suspects that the observation is a trick, part of a method, a strategy).

Several additional errors exist in Hartch's history. But, instead of including more examples of Hartch's factual mistakes, it is useful to examine a kind of personal obsession his historical analysis demonstrates. As I see it, Hartch is making a case—all incorrect—for three things:

1. That Illich disobeyed all his ecclesiastic superiors, including three popes;
2. That he was against the very existence of missionaries, and
3. That the life and work of Illich, since the early 1960s to the end of his life, was a conspiratorial plot against the Catholic church; his writings about education, health or transportation would thus be mere pretexts and ways to cover up his attacks against his real "enemy," the Church.

As I have said, Hartch seems to have created a tribunal (Hartch), to deal with a crime he invented (the preceding three "charges"), and the book is the material collected by the prosecutor (Hartch), and used as a proof by the judge (Hartch) to pronounce his sentence, condemning the criminal. Since it is impossible to demonstrate anything about the inexistent crime, Hartch produces instead a literary piece in which he carefully constructs the crime and the criminal with very subjective, biased and speculative opinions, buried in a mountain of quotes (carefully selected to "prove" his points), factoids, and superficial reviews of Illich's texts while including a few real facts.

Some friends of Ivan, who have refused to review the Hartch book, seriously suspect a plot. Hartch does not look stupid, ignorant or mentally “challenged.” So, if he is so mistaken, they assume, it should be because he is at the service of some obscure interests—in the hierarchy of the Church and/or the American government, or the many headed capitalist hydra—who wants “to pull the teeth out” of Ivan's critique and then use him to pretty up the status quo. In Hartch's book, Ivan evolves from being the wrong man in the wrong place to being a “saboteur of the Church's missions.”

No, I don't believe in any conspiracy theory currently speculated among a few of Ivan's friends, though I understand these as one among several possible reactions against Hartch's book. Such a distortion of the real story cannot but generate anger and suspicion. To the “charges” leveled against Illich by Hartch, I respond.

First, Illich did not disobey his superiors. When the situation came to a conflictive dead-end, he opted for a renunciation of his rights and privileges in order to avoid disobedience and to protect his Church. Only his amazing talent and courage allowed him to do what he did, without losing his dignity and self-respect, but at an enormous price, with a lot of personal suffering. Hartch's quotes, factoids and facts can be used to make this point evident, if we handle them without the biased interpretation and de-contextualization of Hartch. There are many other elements, including believable testimonies, to clarify this point.

To set the record straight, I've included fragments of a document<sup>1</sup>. Not an opinion, a testimony, a speculation; a document. When Ivan came back to Cuernavaca, after the trial in Rome, he wrote to the Bishop of Cuernavaca Méndez Arceo on June 24,

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<sup>1</sup> Please see [http://www.contralinea.com.mx/c10/html/8columnas/ene03\\_herejes.html](http://www.contralinea.com.mx/c10/html/8columnas/ene03_herejes.html) Accessed on July 3, 2015.

1968 asking him to cancel his ministerial licenses. “I want to offer a proof, once again, of my complete submission to the ecclesiastic magisterium, submission that became more absolute and radical during the last three days in Rome. I am, and, with God’s help, I will always be willing to sign any public retraction that is asked from me, founded in some authentic expressions of mine, and my superiors judge that could remedy any damage caused by any imprudent or erroneous expression.” On September 6 the Archbishop of New York authorized him to live like a layman.

On January 14, 1969 Illich sent to Méndez Arceo his resignation from the Church. He wrote, among other things: “...In these last months and years my love towards the Holy Roman Church became more tender and deep... Help me to offer testimony of these attitudes. Of my absolute and rigorous submission to doctrinal authorities...with all their limitations, weaknesses and anachronisms that could characterize them. Of my love for the Church as she is, because in her historical appearances I recognize the only presence properly sacramental of God among us. Of my acceptance of the canonic laws of the Roman Church. It is my wish to contribute to a deep renovation of the Holy Church.” These words of Illich clearly and conclusively show his absolute obedience and commitment to the Church that he loved.

Second, Illich was never against missionaries, as such, or against the mission of the Church. As Cayley’s review states, this is “a very open and shut case.” A careful reader of Hartch’s book may discover this. However, and in spite of Hartch’s confusion, he seems to know this and he presents many quotes, facts and factoids that are solid proof of Ivan’s real struggle, which Ivan himself described, as Cayley reminds us, as a struggle against “an obvious, easily understandable caricature, as a corruption of the mission

given by Jesus to his apostles.” What Illich did was something that can be called “damage control”: he gave many priests and nuns a kind of enlightenment that allowed them to reconsider their position about the “mission” or to do it in a less damaging way.

And this is a very important distinction. When Ivan became the man he was, after the moral epiphany he experienced his first night in New York (described by Hartch), he became committed to intercultural dialogue, the kind of dialogue that the West and particularly the Church have been unable to practice. Yes, Ivan loved the Franciscan fathers coming to the New Spain, but he knew that to call their encounters with the Aztecs in 1524 “the first intercultural dialogue in history” was a very serious distortion of the facts and the very idea of the dialogue. Such an encounter was not a dialogue but a caricature, a clear imposition of both truth and culture by one of the parties (against another). “Interculturality,” that no-man’s land, was at the very center of Ivan’s life and work, and is a contribution toward understanding his position and struggle regarding the American missionaries who were reducing the mission to a program, and a very aggressive program, as an expression of the development enterprise, ignoring the very idea of an intercultural dialogue.

Third, Illich was a deep believer, until the end of his life, and remained a priest – cultivating in his heart all the devotion and commitment that many people acknowledged and admired when he was practicing as a priest. Until the end of his life, he remained loyal to his beloved Church—church as a “she,” as he often said, criticizing it as an “it,” an institution. In condemning Illich, however, Hartch practices a peculiar inversion of his work. It is not, as he writes, that Illich’s critiques of modern institutions were just the smoke screen to hide his critique of the Church. It is precisely the other way around.

In his studies to become a priest, the discipline Illich liked the most was ecclesiology. Illich knew very well the nature and history of the Catholic Church. For him, the Parable of the Good Samaritan was a very good illustration of the main message of Christ: love to the other. In his very open critique to his beloved Church, Ivan began to use the famous dictum: *corruption optimi quae est pessima*. For him, the best, Christ's message, was corrupted by the institutional Church, producing services which are, in the words of Ivan's friend, John Mcknight, the mask of love. Illich was hiding nothing, for there was nothing to hide. There existed neither plot nor conspiracy. Rather, Ivan observed with historical perspective, that all modern institutions were constructed on the model of the Church, and then he applied his critique of the Church to all those institutions and so on and so forth. This is the opposite of what Hartch describes.

In his condemnation of Illich, Hartch appears as a defender of the Church he adopted. Yet, perhaps he is still unable to fully understand that Church and the meaning of allegiance to it. The notion of obedience to the hierarchy is not the same among Catholics as it is among evangelical Protestants. There is a great difference between literal obedience and substantive obedience (for example in connection with the Bible).

In the end, perhaps those friends of Ivan are entirely wrong in their supposition of a conspiracy against Illich. Rather, Hartch is likely a well-intentioned though mistaken historian. But as Ivan said, in the long quote with which Hartch starts his dark novel: "to hell with good intentions."<sup>2</sup>

San Pablo Etna, June 2015

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<sup>2</sup> Please see "To Hell With Good Intentions" by Ivan Illich. Accessed on July 15, 2015 at [http://www.swaraj.org/illich\\_hell.htm](http://www.swaraj.org/illich_hell.htm).