

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 Pat Inman

The Prophet of Cuernavaca: Hartch on Illich

Todd Hartch has written a scholarly and well-researched biography on Ivan Illich, a controversial figure in the 1960s and 1970s. Illich was a Catholic priest and social critic who cited the growth of institutions as responsible for much of what ails the modern world. Hartch teaches Latin American history and world Christianity at Eastern Kentucky University. His research focusing on missions in Latin America provides a strong voice in this publication looking at Illich's life in the context of his role in the Catholic Church and, more specifically, as an advisor to those serving missions in Latin America. Hartch discusses Illich's attempt to discourage missionaries from spreading the gospel of consumerism in great detail. This narrow focus is appropriate for Hartch who has studied and written about missionaries in Latin America.

Hartch starts with a detailed description of Illich's priesthood and the influences affecting his spiritual formation. This is an area not previously addressed in other biographies of Illich. The author speaks of the "lives of Illich," separating the "Catholic period" from his "secular period." The remainder of the book discusses how these "lives" transitioned. I would argue his life was more of a transition from a focus on political advocacy to individual relationship.

In the spirit of full disclosure, I write this review as a friend of Illich. I am one of many. I would make the argument Illich's friends, more than anything affected his life focus and contributed to a worldview that was both critical and celebratory. It was not their thought, but

his belief that it is only through relationship to one another that we can create a life-sustaining culture.

Shortly before his death, Ivan asked me to help him look at how his thoughts had changed on education over the years. Spending a week with him in conversation after having read most of his writing, I came to realize that his thoughts had not so much “changed” but deepened and simplified. His initial focus on political action for others transitioned to a mantra of simplicity, “Be a friend.”

His initial critique of institutions had to do with their scale. The larger they become, the greater need to standardize individuals to maximize efficiency. Differences or “gifts” made management more difficult. Looking to the uniqueness of friends just got in the way. One did not pick up the banner of social justice for a particular population as part of a political movement, but rather worked in the spirit of friendship. His critiques of the Church, schools and medicine provided an illustration of what happens when institutions become more important than relationships.

In concluding, Hartch asks a fair question—What would have happened had Illich not been so effective in discouraging missionaries from supporting “needy” populations? Did the world miss an opportunity to do more good than harm? Would individuals in “need” not appreciate the “improved” quality of life missionaries were sent to bring?

In asking missionaries to question a culture of consumption, Illich asked them to view their work from another lens. Global policy suggested lives are disposable and the earth’s resources unlimited. Illich asked them to question this. He asked them to develop “convivial” tools to create a life-sustaining society rather than life-destroying . In such a context

missionaries may have used their courage and creativity to develop a sustainable economy offering a culture of peace rather than a culture of divisive inequality.