

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 David Kast

Ivan Illich, Me and Thoughts On *The Prophet of Cuernavaca*

In 2006 I traveled to Edmonton, Alberta, to attend the Sacred Web Conference, *Tradition in the Modern World*. There I met briefly with Prof. Seyyed Nasr, one of the principal speakers. Some may recall that Professor Nasr spoke at the *Education & Technology: Asking the Right Questions* Conference at Penn State (Sept. 17-20, 1997) to honor Jacques Ellul and Ivan Illich. A widely respected member of the traditionalist school associated with Rene Guenon, Ananda Coomaraswamy and Frithjof Schuon, Prof. Nasr teaches Islamic Studies at George Washington University in Washington, DC. I found his talk at Penn State unique and unlike his writings and usual manner of speaking. While most of the talks on that day were about technology, limits, education and modernity, his was a plea for the West and us at the conference to awaken to what we were doing worldwide and particularly in the Middle East, and for the United States in particular to please leave the Middle East alone, to stop imposing itself and its ideology, its industrial and technological model, its arrogance on that part of the world. The talk was a humble plea, unlike his more usually magisterial and erudite, even austere, manner of speaking. I was deeply impressed with it.

Nasr had been invited to speak at the Penn State conference as a friend of Illich who had introduced both Illich and his ideas to Iran in the mid-70s when he, Nasr, was

living and teaching there. So I approached him at the Sacred Web conference, introduced myself, and asked if he could tell me something about Illich's visit to Iran and how he saw Illich vis-à-vis the traditionalist school. But Prof. Nasr demurred and sent me to speak with Prof. William Chittick, another Islamic scholar (who teaches at SUNY Stony Brook and who Nasr said was closer friends with Illich). Prof. Chittick had studied with Prof. Nasr in Iran during the 70s and had met Illich there. He was happy to converse with me.

Prof. Chittick told me that Illich had said that he wanted to write so clearly that an engineer would understand and accept his arguments. Then Chittick looked at me and smiled saying, "But I don't really think most engineers are likely to read Illich." I asked him what he thought Illich's attitude toward the traditionalist school had been and he replied that he didn't really think Illich had been much interested in it.

This is a rather long story that I tell for a couple of reasons. Illich was a devout and orthodox Catholic thinker—orthodox by his own calling and devout in the sense that he never relinquished his deep spiritual ties to or faith in the Church or the Christian ethos, the teaching of the incarnation. Though Illich had many friends from other religious traditions, one never sensed that he judged or tried to understand them from his particularly Catholic perspective. Nor did he compare the fundamentals of others. Instead, Illich took people as they were, reacting and interacting with them as they and he found one another. Each was obviously quite appropriately there. Clearly he spoke from his own tradition, he never hid that, but you see, we all do whether we think so or not...even if our own tradition is the modern non-tradition!

In Todd Hartch's, *Prophet of Cuernavaca*, I find a deep respect for and appreciation of Illich's work. Yet, even though Hartch is a professor of religion (at Eastern Kentucky University), I don't think he quite fully grasps in Illich the religious grappling, the effort to articulate through secular discourse, through critique, the deeper wholeness to which we all are heirs and which I see Illich wanting for us ... wanting us to know. As Illich was to later say more explicitly (although he would say so also in fragments along the way), it finally came down to, in the vernacular, learning how to bear our own suffering, to share hospitality, to embrace our fragility and imminent deaths. One thing I learned from reading Illich and meeting him was to recognize the wholeness of our being as spiritual (mental) and corporeal beings. We often dream of peace in such abstract and universalist ways, but I will now say to people (really telling myself also), "Something I can touch with my hands, hear with my ears directly, see, taste, smell ... and feel (with my heart), that is what I can deal with now, that's all." Let's see now, recognizing my contingency, my weakness, my poverty, my powerlessness.

Toward the end of the 60s, Illich promised the Church not to speak about the Church or religion directly (and how hard that must have been for him to do). He pretty much kept this promise until near the end of his life. Yet, in his own *apophatic* way (Illich's "new way of doing theology," as Lee Hoinacki would say many times) Illich delved into historical research on modern certitudes and systems—reaching beneath their encrusting chimeras of reality to a richer, simpler, convivial wholeness based eventually on friendship. In the process he laid bare our fear of death, our insecurity and our grasping at manufactured needs.

Although Hartch does capture a good deal of the dynamism of Illich, his mercurial and prescient vision as well as his fiery temperament and his interactions, both positive and negative, with many others, if one wants an overview of Illich's work, one were better off going to *Ivan Illich in Conversation* with David Cayley (and don't miss its excellent introduction) and the two introductions by Lee Hoinacki and Carl Mitcham in *The Challenges of Ivan Illich*. All of the essays in that latter book are good but better yet, I urge those interested in Illich to plough through his original writings. They are many and rich.

For those unfamiliar with Illich's thought, Illich had two main periods to his active publishing life: his CIDOC years and a little after (from the 60s to the late 70s); and then from the early 80s until the end of his life. During the earlier period, Illich was in some sense an activist. He not only gave clairvoyant and prescient critiques of modern institutions, but also suggested needed change (he did so in *Energy and Equity* (1973) and *Medical Nemesis* (1975) but had pretty much left off this by the time of *Shadow Work* (1981)). (In passing I might add, in reference to Prof. Chittick's recounting of Illich's earlier stated desire, that *Energy and Equity* probably most clearly illustrates writing that even an engineer would understand and accept.)

In the earlier period Illich often spoke of the urgent need for research and warned of imminent disaster. He spoke prophetically. He advocated for networks of learning (*Deschooling Society* (1971)) and for limiting speed (*Energy and Equity*). In *Tools for Conviviality* (1973) Illich writes:

“The transition to socialism cannot be effected without an inversion of our present institutions...the retooling of society will remain a pious dream unless the ideals of socialist justice prevail.” (12)

One can detect an urgency in Illich’s message. Much of his teaching in Cuernavaca, as suggested by Hartch, had the somewhat contradictory nature of demands for action, leadership, highly trained personnel (“experts”) and imposed discipline while also counseling the search for freedom from institutional, industrialized control and professionals. And there were his attacks on the missionary enterprise. His critiques and research continued alongside this urgency.

Then in the late 70s a change began taking place. One sees it clearly by the time of *Shadow Work* (1981) and certainly in *Gender* (1982), the talks collected in *In the Mirror of the Past* (1992), in *ABC: The Alphabetization of the Popular Mind* (1988), *H₂O and the Waters of Forgetfulness* (1985), and in *In the Vineyard of the Text* (1993). He is no longer proselytizing. He is offering studies in the changing certitudes of our lives and their historical genesis. He is noting watersheds, the emergence of new metaphors. (See for example *The Scopic Past and the Ethics of the Gaze* (1998) and *Guarding the Eye in the Age of Show* (2001)).

At a meeting in Maine in 1984, Illich addressed a gathering of friends and colleagues who saw Illich as a progressive, a socialist (read again the quote above from *Tools*) and who were looking for guidance and approval for progressive social change. Perhaps, they had missed many of Illich’s early warnings and skepticism toward all systems approaches and also his early adoption of many ideas of Leopold Kohr on scale

and proportion. Illich's ideas about education and medicine had changed, had grown. By then, he had clearly recognized in the socialist ideal and in the free-school and self-help movements the same problems of dependency on manufactured needs and on systems. Illich had clarified within himself an understanding of the vernacular. He had noted its loss and no longer saw "the" or even "a" solution. Still, he sought to clarify our position, to understand its roots and the need for all to see those roots in order that then we each or in tandem could work out our own solutions through friendship, hospitality. He had renounced any form of guruship. He had recognized his own powerlessness and its necessity. In the process of this change, he could not allow those who clung to what he saw as a flawed utopian illusion to try to hold him there. They did not see or understand what he now saw.

I was not at that meeting, but in talks with John Ohliger who was, I was told that Ivan very strongly, even harshly, put off many of those earlier followers of his and that a permanent rupture took place between himself and many of them. I understand how many progressives can fail to see the prison of utopian idealism and its large scale social planning. I also can understand how someone like Illich could not allow himself to be tethered, and also how many others could be hurt by his apparent radical turn of direction and the way in which he presented it to them, particularly if they had not seen the germs of it in his earlier work.

Among the things that I enjoyed in Hartch's book are the stories of people who loved and admired Illich from his early career to the end, of people who had fallings out with him and others who were simply perplexed by him or thought he didn't make any sense at all. Hartch also shares stories of some of Illich's personal experiences. One story

concerns Illich's 40-day stay at Assekrem in the Ahaggar Mountains of Algeria in 1959. Illich spent his time there in "complete exterior and interior silence," sleeping on a stone bed in a cave, relishing the intense visual experience, and having "the most wonderful time of his life...." "The immensity of the desert," Illich said of Assekrem, "overwhelms both the power and weakness of men...." (27)

What attracted me most to Illich were not the ideas, rich as they were and are, but the deep religious sense I felt, the wholeness and compassion and the pain, the anguish, that permeate his writing without him having to say a word in that vein explicitly. And of course, the architecture of his thought.