

On The Alert!
Crisis As a Permanent State: How We Get Used To A No-Thing¹

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Thomas Aquinas defines "austerity" as a virtue which does not exclude all enjoyments, but only those which are distracting from or destructive of personal relatedness. For Thomas, "austerity" is a complementary part of a more embracing virtue, which he calls friendship or joyfulness. It is the fruit of an apprehension that things or tools could destroy rather than enhance *eutrapelia* (or graceful playfulness) in personal relations. (Hugo v. Rahner, *Man at Play*, New York, 1972.)

We have invited you to this meeting hoping this virtue that can foster personal relations may be with us, even though our invitation is not really inviting. We have faced you with a cascade of words that are able to frighten us, any single one of them but particularly so in their combination. It's hard to know which of them is the most threatening and disquieting. The most intrusive and aggressive one maybe the word *alarm*. "Alarm" signals immediately threatening danger and does not only call for ultimate vigilance but also urges people to act promptly if they are able to confront the danger, or to flee instantaneously if they are not. "Alarm" reminds me irresistibly of screaming sirens, announcing the next air raid towards Hamburg. And even now I can't hear the sound of sirens without that feeling of panic coming back.

¹ This paper was originally presented at a symposium on October 2-3, 2014 at Frankfurt am Main. The organizer, "Stiftung Convivial," is a foundation located in Wiesbaden and committed to promoting thinking after and with Ivan Illich. See <http://www.convivial.de/illich.html>) The conference theme: "Alarmbereitschaft. Krise als Dauerzustand, Gewöhnung an ein Unding." (Being on the alert: Crisis as a permanent state - Getting used to a No-Thing).

In the *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Deutschen* I read: Alarm m. *Warnsignal bei Gefahr* (warning signal in the case of danger); *Zustand der Gefahr* (state of danger); *Beunruhigung* (agitation); *Bereitschaft* (readiness). *Lärm* (noise) is a derivative of “alarm.” “Alarm” itself derives from the Italian , *all arme*, the command that called the soldiers to arms.

Many meanings and even contradictory connotations flow together in this term: flight and attack, danger, worry and disturbance, horror and being headless, watchfulness and being on the alert, tenseness of nerves and withheld breath, but above all: scarcity of time. That is to say, no time to keep cool and composed or to practice calm consideration.

But the subject of our symposium is “being on the alert” and that means two different things. The first meaning—you have to be prepared for an alarm at any time because the circumstances of your existence have become shaky, unstable, no longer trustworthy and can fall to pieces out of the blue. On the other hand “on the alert” means that as soon as you hear the warning signals, you have instantly to give up any other pursuit whatsoever and follow the sirens without even knowing why and where to go. Both kinds of readiness create an untenable situation in the strict sense of the word. Both create a situation that cannot be prolonged. One can be alarmed only for a very short time. After that he must calm down, or wait, or either do something or let the announced catastrophe happen, while endeavouring to establish a kind of everyday life within completely changed or even destructed circumstances afterwards.

“Alarm” is supposed to prevent the worst and to save lives. Everybody is urged “to save his soul.” “Alarm” isn’t the catastrophe itself, it’s the prelude to the catastrophe—which then either occurs or can be prevented by coordinated efforts. Alternatively, the catastrophe does not happen at all which turns the alarm into a false

alarm. Too, those who are able to raise the alarm are very powerful, possessing also the ability to misuse the alarm. When people are frightened or scared, they will be ready to accept any offer of rescue whatsoever.

“Alarm,” particularly when furnished with an exclamation mark, may be the most noticeable term in our headline, but the most important one is “crisis.” I am sure that nobody in this room, when asked to define “*the* crisis” in a plausible way, could give a conclusive answer. As understood today “crisis” is a non-thing, a no-thing, a non-sense, which is able to upset us, but cannot be experienced as real.

In his early writings, for instance in *Tools for Conviviality*, in *The Right to Useful Unemployment* or in *Disabling Professions*, Ivan Illich was very concerned with the crisis to come. Later on the term is no longer found in his texts *expressis verbis*. I think that is due to the fact that he could no longer believe in the coming of the crisis. Belief in the crisis? This seems to be a strange way of putting it. As if a change to the better could be hoped for from a worldwide crisis. And that’s exactly what Illich did in the seventies even though he was sufficiently skeptical. Illich wrote,

“It would be pretentious to predict if this age, when needs were shaped by professional design, will be remembered with a smile or with a curse. I do, of course, hope that it will be remembered as the night, when father went on a binge, dissipated the family fortune and obligated the children to start anew.”²

Ivan Illich understood crisis in the traditional Greek sense as a turning point in a situation that has become untenable, in other words, he understood crisis as the point at which something settles itself rather than that it has to be settled by activity.

² Ivan Illich: *Disabling Professions*, London 1977, p. 13.

In the course of a serious disease the crisis is the critical situation, when the disease turns either to life or to death, when the organism is defeated or able to overcome. And it might be true that hope has an important influence on this decision, though not an influence that can be counted on.

I think all of us are familiar with this ambivalent sense of the meaning of crisis—that it can bear life and death. Likely we would have answered in this sense to the question, what the word “crisis” means. But this knowledge doesn’t really help. “Crisis,” as it is used in present everyday language, has lost its ambiguity. Crisis is nothing that can be hoped for. On the contrary, crisis must be conquered using all available means. Crisis is not at all noticeably present in time and space. It’s somewhat cryptic yet lasting. I could even say: the crisis doesn’t exist, there is only the rumour of the crisis. But that doesn’t allow us to be happy. Instead of the crisis we have to deal with a lingering catastrophe that has been systematically deprived of its potential to become a crisis. While we, on the one hand, can no longer believe in the crisis, we are on the other hand tempted to believe in the rumours of the crisis. These two differing beliefs demonstrate two different bases—belief grounded in hope or in purchasing power.

Today, powerful interests hide themselves behind the rumours of crisis. Listening to the relevant parts of Illich’s early texts, we get an idea of how he understood the phenomenon of crisis, what he hoped for, and what was for him terrifying with respect to the crisis. In the light of this understanding, which was still possible in the seventies we may get an idea of to what degree of refinement the mystification of the crisis has been developed so that today without any irritation the non-sense (non-thing) of a permanent crisis is taken for real. We have gotten used to

this condition of permanent crisis, being ready to believe that the non-sense makes sense und the no-thing does exist in reality. Illich wrote,

“The symptoms of accelerated crisis are widely recognized. Multiple attempts have been made to explain them. I believe that this crisis is rooted in a major twofold experiment that has failed, and I claim that the resolution of the crisis begins with a recognition of the failure. For a hundred years we have tried to make machines work for men and to school men for life in their service. Now it turns out that machines do not "work" and that people cannot be schooled for a life at the service of machines. The hypothesis on which the experiment was built must now be discarded. The hypothesis was that machines can replace slaves. The evidence shows that, used for this purpose, machines enslave men.”³

The project to replace men with robots is at the core of the crisis. More precisely and at present the modern crisis cannot be described. Nevertheless it is impressive, from our point of view, how determined Ivan Illich was to predict a very near breakdown of this hybrid project. The evidence of the failure of the industrial mode of production and consumption seemed irrefutable to him. And he was hopeful that this insight might completely change the relationship between people and their tools with the consequence that convivial instead of destructive tools would be created. Illich wrote,

³ Ivan Illich: Tools for conviviality, Great Britain 1975 (Fontana) p. 23.

“People need new tools to work with rather than tools that ‘work’ for them.

The technology to make the most of their energy and imagination each has, rather than more well-programmed energy slaves.”⁴

But Illich was always aware of the ambiguity of the crisis. He never forgot that the crisis had two exits, one leading to life, the other to death. He wasn’t an optimist, but he was hopeful. He hoped for a radical change and he was confident that the industrial system, being not only counterproductive, but also destructive, could be overcome. On the dark side of the crisis he saw two possibilities. Namely that the situation, being untenable, might explode in an unbounded and incurable break down, one that couldn’t be survived. Ivan didn’t speak about this disastrous possibility, because it surmounts our imagination. He refused to participate in modern *catastrophily* while adopting the stance that one can only be silent when words and imagination fail. And that’s what he did in participating in those silent groups that expressed silently a “No without any Yes” to genocide-machines in the early eighties. The only attitude that seems imaginable towards this all-destructive possibility is to mobilize the utmost in order to impede and slow down its progress. Günther Anders speaks of an only limited space of time remaining, which makes it impossible for us to think of history as a succession of epochs any longer. This desperate contradiction between the necessity to impede and the necessity to force the crisis characterizes our situation and this is just the operation site for those experts who administer the crisis in order to guarantee its permanence.

The other way to manage the crisis without undergoing a radical change is that “technocratic caretakers (could) be mandated to set limits on growth in every

⁴ Ibidem

dimension, and to set them just at the point beyond which further production would mean utter destruction. Such a *kakotopia* could maintain the industrial age at the highest endurable level of output, (but hardly human beings). Man would live in a plastic bubble that would protect his survival while rendering it increasingly worthless. Since man's tolerance would become the most serious limitation to growth, the alchemist's endeavour would be renewed in the attempt to produce a monstrous type of man fit to live among reason's dreams. A major function of engineering would become the psychogenetic tooling of man himself as a condition for further growth.”⁵

But even this horrible vision, didn't discourage Illich's hope that the installation of this managerial fascism could be evaded. This confidence left him later, however, when he had to recognize that in industrial societies exactly this monstrous way had been chosen— against all insight into the apparent counterproductivity and destructiveness of industrialism and further industrial growth.

A diabolic paradox has been forced on people. Everybody knows that we cannot proceed in the way that we have; everybody knows that school is a kind of hell, producing manifold suffering and obstructing manifold useful capabilities and talents. Everybody knows that the health care system is not only a danger to health and wellbeing, but also no longer affordable. Everybody knows that the traffic has become a kind of raving standstill. But those who experience all this day by day, nevertheless call for more of the same instead of demanding radical change. This paradox makes the absurdity of a “crisis in permanence” possible. We can see now that the most threatening word of our theme is neither “alarm” nor “crisis” but “permanence.” Those who suffer from the ever-growing speed of our everyday life may perceive everything that lasts, that is constant or permanent as soothing and

⁵ Ibidem, pp. 115-116

reassuring. But from the standpoint of Dantes' Hell the never-ending, the continuation in permanence means infinite horror. From our point of view it means the perpetual continuation of the project to replace man by machinery (the apparatus) and finally to change man himself into a perfect apparatus. (*Vom Menschenersatz zum Ersatzmenschen*).

We must ask ourselves, why this monstrous project cannot be abandoned with a "No without any Yes" by those who function as its raw material? Why don't they provoke a crisis that deserves this name? Why don't they think of ways to master their existence without undermining the conditions of their being in the world as humans? Why hasn't the outbreak of the crisis, that Ivan Illich believed so near, been domesticated and turned round in a way that its power died out?

Powerful monopolies have joined together, multiplying their forces immensely in an aggregate global monopoly with the intention to install and control a monoculture of thinking. They are the driving forces that guarantee worldwide "progress" and "development": the natural sciences, the economy, the technology and bureaucracy. Their destructive forces evolve from the fact that they hold a monopoly in their respective fields of operation. Science demands the monopoly, to interpret and explain the world; the economy claims the monopoly of world distribution; technology holds the monopoly to produce the world as a man-made second nature to be consumed; and bureaucracy monopolizes the ruling and organisation of the world. As an interconnected system they build a superpower which has already carried through its claim to global dominance. It tends to include everything into its dominion, to make everything part of itself. It doesn't tolerate other gods. "You shall consent to my knowledge and trust my evidence," says science. "You shall be willing to defeat your neighbour," says economy. "Let the apparatus work instead of you. Be

served and cared for,” says technology. “That will have its price however,” remarks economy. Above all you mustn’t disturb, says bureaucracy.

The power to destroy the cultural and material heritage that has been accumulated in this system is unimaginable and annihilating, so that every means seems justified to suppress its outbreak as long as possible. However, as the four modern apocalyptic riders have decreed a monoculture of thinking, there is in fact only one means to attain at least a postponement: the continuation of the same with ever refined means. The propaganda is focussed on the non-existence of alternatives. “We have no choice!” goes the well known statement—a declaration of political bankruptcy. The “crisis” is conquered with exactly those means that have led to it, by just the system that can survive only in the shadow of a permanent crisis. Within this kind of management of the crisis there are however many means accepted to let the crisis smoulder without arousing the fire, and fuel anxieties while at the same time appeasing them.

“All that is worrying and alarming us is settled in the future,” the French sociologist Luc Boltanski states. He continues,

“It is not yet known, at least not exactly. Therefore support is needed from experts, computer centres, prognosis specialists to understand the coming change, that we will inevitably have to undergo, but not before later. We must agree to this unavoidable mutation, because the forces pushing the world towards this change are inexorable. There is no other way. And as those who bear the ‘responsibility’ for the future, we must try to make the best of them.”⁶

⁶ Luc Boltanski: Individualismus und Freiheit, in: WestEnd, 5. Jg. Heft 2 2008 S. 145 (Translation M.G.)

In anticipatory obedience we shall adapt ourselves to what is irrevocably coming and we are to welcome this adaptation as our freedom and to take our responsibility seriously. This is, says Boltansky, the logic of the limbo—which is a kind of “big waiting room, however without any prospect of being permitted to leave this room one day.” Is there, Boltanski asks, a term more adequate to characterize at least metaphorically our situation than the term “limbo”? Though it is not particularly uncomfortable, limbo is a place dominated by an immense tristesse.”⁷

Another strategy to maintain the state of arousal and to produce general agreement on more and more preventive measures, more and more safety regulations, and more and more surveillance, is to divide the general crisis of the industrial system into many different sub-crises that cannot be identified as arising from the same origin. These appear as independent trouble spots *within* the system and distract the attention from the crisis *of* the system. The case by case combat requires ever more restrictions of freedom, ever more industrial growth, needs more and more bureaucratic management and ever exclusive knowledge of experts.

In this way we get used to the ideology of “Alternatives not available!” and to the crisis as permanent state. It is as fatal to succumb to this ideology, as to believe lightheadedly that we could manage a change to the better by all sorts of corrections, concerning this or that, by alternative projects, models and institutions to save the world. But without the belief in what Rudolf Schottlaender calls the “*Auchanderskönnen*,” (the capacity to choose a completely different way) the catastrophe cannot be transformed into a crisis. Catastrophes can only be canalized into a crisis when people are able to see new goals and perspectives, says Illich. The crisis of the industrial system can be canalized only when people recognize the

⁷ Rolf Schieder: In der Vorhölle, in: Luc Boltanski: Die Vorhölle, Berlin 2011 S. 130f.

practicability of autonomous and convivial ways of production. The contribution of Ivan Illich consists in his having given a voice to the “*Auchanderskönnen*” even after he distanced himself from the too hopeful views of the early seventies. Given the global domination of the apocalyptic four, the direction of resistance has to change radically. Not within the system can we practice variants of the “*Auchanderskönnen*,” but only outside the system. The distinction between inside and outside, which has nearly disappeared, becomes crucial—a question of our viability as human beings. Only as system-absconders or system-deserters we can hope to get a foreshadowing of the radically other (*Auchanderskönnen*).

In 1977 Ivan Illich wrote:

“Crisis now means that moment when doctors, diplomats, bankers and assorted social engineers take over and liberties are suspended. ... ‘Crisis,’ the Greek term for ‘choice’ or ‘turning point’ in all modern languages now means ‘driver, step on the gas. Crisis now means an ominous but tractable threat against which money, manpower and management can be rallied. ... But the term ‘crisis’ need not have this meaning. It need not imply any headlong rush for the escalation of management. Instead it can mean the instant of choice, the marvellous moment, when people become suddenly aware of their self-imposed cages and of the possibility of a different life.”⁸

Frankfurt Naxos 2014 Übersetzung

⁸ Ivan Illich: Equity in Useful Unemployment and its Professional Enemies, Cuernavaca 1977 (Tecnopolitica)