

Introduction to Volume V, No. 1 (2016)

Now is the time of Ivan Illich. Today.

First, we need his courage. Very early in his life, he cultivated the courage to see the current horror, in all its darkness. He refused to join the mass closing of eyes and minds and hearts; pretending that to live a “normal” life was possible ... that the current “crisis” would come to an end one of these days – in the manner of all its predecessors.

Ivan dared to intensely gaze; to see while the mainstream looked on with eyes wide shut. Ivan explained time and again that a prophet is not a person with a crystal ball. Rather, prophets see deeply into the present, observing trends embedded in it. Prophets understand the present having developed the hindsight enabling them to anticipate what may happen. He dared to see when it was more convenient to look away ... to pretend that the changes were only a new normal.

He was not alone, for sure. In 1967, for example, he invited his friends to join him in “A Call to Celebration.” In a spirit of awakening, Illich urged us “to face facts, rather than deal in illusions –to live change, rather than rely on engineering.” (p.13) His friend José María Sbert, reflecting on Illich’s invitation in the 60s wrote: “everything was called into question: family, work, education, success, sanity, madness, childrens’ care, love, urbanism, science, technology, progress, wealth....”(Sbert, 2009, p. 57) “Suddenly, all the youth in the world were united and found a common language to answer all questions. It was needed to change everything.” (Dehesa 1997, p. 23) There was a moment, observed Deleuze and Guattari, “in which it was possible to suddenly see what was intolerable in the society, and at the same time the possibilities of another social reality.” (Quoted in Weber 1998, 158).

Once again, writing in the 1970s, Illich was not alone when calling for institutional revolution. Not long after, however, he was alone when he dared to see the horror ... the tragedy of the path not taken. The path of hope denied, today we find ourselves in the thick of the violence and madness in which we are living. More than

ever, we need the courage Ivan Illich cultivated. Half a century later, we cannot but experience what is intolerable in this society, increasingly evident, making news everyday. At the same time, with Ivan Illich, we also cannot but see the possibilities of other social realities — of which we also have examples everyday. To join Ivan Illich in his hope and faith, we need his courage: allowing him to challenge all modern institutions—including his Church, his own convictions, dominant modes of thinking, science, and all the systems managed by the scientific frame of mind.

To understand Illich is to know that such courageous awareness cannot but be translated into action. We need to live the change, not to rely on engineering or even less on academic intellectual contortions. Yes, Ivan was an amazing erudite: medievalists, historians, sociologists, theologians and many others may reclaim Ivan as one prominent member of their privileged class. His erudition, notwithstanding, he was first and last, a man of action. Radically disinterested in power, he had no interest in becoming a leader organizing a vanguard to lead the masses. He worked assiduously and unflinchingly to influence the social reality of his time, to resist the horror and to both suggest and to construct another possibility. And Illich's specific attitude had a color, a shape: interculturality.

Illich's interculturality meant completely abandoning the universality in which he was shaped; fully opening himself to radical plurality. He anticipated what grassroots groups like the Zapatistas suggested: constructing a world in which many worlds can be embraced. That was Ivan's dream. Thus, he never suggested one single path out of the mess he was describing in so many fields. He fully assumed that after the collapse of every modern institution—the collapse we are observing today—we will be walking and making a wild diversity of paths. Not any single highway. No thank you!

In the conversation that follows with Gustavo Esteva, we discover how Ivan Illich became a man of action embedded in interculturality. Having arrived to New York to study the manuscripts of Alberto Magnus in Princeton, from one day to the next, Ivan Illich changed his path. Horrified to discover how his Church was mistreating the Puerto Rican *jibaritos*, Illich used his capacity as a Catholic priest to radically change such treatment, to change the reality in New York City. He, thus, anticipated many changes in his Church and in the social reality. On his new transformative path, he never ceased to

be a man of action even as his renown as a public intellectual became international overnight.

Today, more than ever, we need Ivan's guidance to fully understand the collapse of all modern institutions—the collapse that we still don't dare to see, despite the facts unraveling before our eyes. These unravelings are happening in the way Ivan anticipated. Too, Ivan also saw how people would react. Very precise descriptions of Illich's prescience can be found in the last pages of *Tools for Conviviality*.

In 1992, David Cayley asked him: "When you wrote *Tools for Conviviality*, you laid out a political program for inverting the structure of tools, as you put it. And now you're saying, I think, that it happened, but not in the way you anticipated." Ivan answered:

It happened in a way I had not anticipated. In the last words of that book I said that I knew in which direction things would happen but not what would bring them to that point. At that time I believed in some big, symbolic event, in something similar to the Wall Street crash. Instead of that, it is hundreds of millions of people just using their brains and trusting their senses. We now live in a world in which most things that industry and government do are misused by people for their own purposes. (p.117)

Hundreds of millions of people, perhaps billions, are today using their brains and trusting their senses, as a condition for survival. And they are openly misusing whatever industry and government are producing. Again as a condition for survival, and with amazing imagination to escape from the current madness while beginning to construct a new world.

As the conversation follows, we can find the clues to what is happening now, to what we need to dare to see. Cayley says: "What I was quoting was your prediction that if our society continued on its present track we would in effect cease to be human beings. The way you put it was that we would 'break all bridges to a normative past.'" "This has happened," answers Ivan. (p.123) And he elaborates on a description of what was happening. It was almost impossible to accept such Illichian descriptions in 1992. Not surprisingly, many readers of Cayley's book were unable to fully grasp what Ivan was

saying. But today the conditions Illich prophesied are entirely evident. We can see around us many “people,” including children, who have ceased to be human beings; at least what humans have called human beings in the whole history of humankind. Ivan writes:

We are on the threshold of a still unnoticed transition from a political consciousness based on progress, growth, and development—rooted in the dreams of the Enlightenment—to a new yet unnamed consciousness defined by controls which ensure a ‘sustainable system’ of needs satisfaction. Development is dead, yes. But the well-meaning experts who propagate needs are now busily at work re-conceptualizing their discovery, and in the process redefining humanity yet again. The citizen is being redefined as a cyborg. The former individual, who as a member of a ‘population’ has become a ‘case,’ is now modeled in the image of an immune system that can provisionally be kept functioning if it is kept in balance by appropriate management.... Such a world has lost credibility in the matrix of a new world now conceived as a system. When the term, needs, is now used within this new context, it ‘functions’ as a euphemism for the management of citizens who have been reconceptualized as sub-systems within a population. (Illich in Sachs, 2010. p. 108)

Yes, Ivan was basically alone in seeing the horror of humans transmogrified. It took all the courage we join others in celebrating. His writings of the last ten years of his life offer some hints of what he was seeing—the age of systems replacing the age of tools—and he shared some of his insights with his closest friends, though not in public. (“I have become increasingly silent in public,” Illich remarked; He no longer had a language for sharing his insights with others. Cayley, 1992, p.125).

Still, Illich never fell into despair and even less into apocalyptic randomness. He still believed in what he wrote at the end of *Deschooling Society*: “Survival of the human race depends on its rediscovery (of hope) as a social force.” (p.106) He was still hoping that Epimethean men had already been born—people who value hope more than expectations, who love people more than products, who love the earth in which each can meet the other, who collaborate with their Promethean brother in the lighting of the fire and shaping of iron, but who do so to enhance their ability to tend and care and wait upon the other. (Pp.115-166)

No room for expectation, in this moment of danger, in this inhuman world in which are now living. Still, with Illich, we see lots of room for hope: "Another world is

not only possible,” clarifies Arundati Roy, “she's on the way and, on a quiet day, if you listen very carefully you can hear her breathe.” As Ivan also anticipated.

In offering the current issue of the *International Journal of Illich Studies*, we recognize in the diversity of submissions, the “stepping stones” suggested by Illich and laid by people around the globe as they humbly seek ways “out beyond the madness.” With Illich, our contributing authors along with people of all persuasions and walks are: questioning politics (Estevea); forging new ways of addressing the multiple crises and collapses in which we are now living (de Majo, Rivage-Seul); discerning Illich’s influences (Woll, Milano); and seeing Illich’s hope in recovering the “arts of living, suffering, and dying.” (Steinberg, Keeley) We are grateful to these contributors, and to the many whose simple yet profound recovery of *philia* and of hospitality will become the foundation upon which we all live together.

Sincerely,

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