

Comments on Ivan Illich's Thesis on Arnold Joseph Toynbee

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Ivan Illich received his doctorate in 1951 in Salzburg for his thesis on "The Philosophical Foundations of Historiography in Arnold Joseph Toynbee's Work." This work has not been considered in the discussion of Illich's scientific writings due to the fact that is not well-known. It was lost for a long time. It is almost one hundred pages long and the appendix consists of a wealth of comments and footnotes.

The British historian, Toynbee (1889-1975), was one of the most important universal historians of the 20th century. He worked as a professor in London, while also serving as director of the foreign archives of the Royal Institute of International Affairs and of the archives of the Foreign Office. In 1951, only six volumes of his ten-volume magnum opus, "A Study of History," had been published. "A Study of History" is often mentioned alongside Oswald Spengler's famous book, "The Decline of the West." (1923) Illich writes neither a biography nor does he judge the historian's accomplishments. He rather tries to systematically ask for the foundations of Toynbee's philosophical thoughts as it comes to light in his essential writings and lectures since the beginning of "A Study of History." The work is divided into three main parts: General Regulations, Historical Logic, and Ontology. It follows Toynbee's reasoning and argumentation and describes these in a factual and objective manner. While doing so, Illich occasionally expresses his sympathy for the work's brilliant style, original ideas, erudition, and associative method. This also applies to critical remarks that Illich includes in his writing in the form of short

notes but on which he does not elaborate in a more detailed fashion. The basis of his criticism thus remains only implicit.

The first main part “General Regulations” is further divided into “The Object of History” and “The Concept of Civilization.” Here, Illich describes Toynbee’s approach to historiography.

It is a historian’s task to observe and describe a play and its acts, actions and performances, which the historian will only understand if he knows the play in its entirety and is familiar with the laws by which the “personas” interact. (Illich, p. 1).

According to Toynbee, world history consists of a limited number of dramas. Being the son of a historian mother, he is interested in universal history. “The urge to capture history’s unity and the urge for synthesis of the historical material for the purpose of an ethical judgment of the present time brought him to cultural morphology in its very peculiar type, which he himself created.” (Illich, p. 4)

According to Illich, Toynbee’s ideas are largely based on British empiricism and on Thucydides, who was a Greek historian in Athens, 455-395 BC. His work opens up the critically objective, politically oriented historiography that came along with careful research of primary sources and interpretation of the inner workings. Philosophically Toynbee was, according to Illich, mainly influenced by the Greek classics, as well as Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke and Bergson. Furthermore, Spengler’s work also impressed Toynbee, even though he disagreed with Spengler in many respects and accused him of having a materialistic worldview as well as of sharing beliefs of anti-historic apriorism. For Toynbee, the study of history has an ethical and practical sense. We can learn from history, which repeats itself without affecting human freedom. Toynbee strives to

empirically prove this basic, intuitively perceived hypothesis in the course of his magnum opus.

Illich writes, “To make repetitions and thus comparisons possible, it is absolutely necessary to find entities that can be compared to each other, because no parallels can be drawn if only one object of a particular species is present.” (Illich, p. 6) Toynbee’s ideas are based on the concept of civilization. He describes comparable entities in history, which can develop freely and dynamically. In this sense, civilizations are logically comprehensible entities and metaphysically dynamic communities. Toynbee defines history as the science of civilizations, of which only twenty-one exist.

Toynbee only calls those communities a civilization that change their structures and are dynamic, either on the outside or on the inside – that is, in the structure of social conditions, not just individuals or external conditions such as the geographical environment or passive attempts of contacting other societies. (Illich, p.8)

In this context, Illich illustrates the difference between Toynbee and the ideas of Spengler and of other national historians on just a few pages. Spengler argues in a more organic fashion and systematizes different cultures much more. Illich writes, “For Toynbee, on the other hand, the comparison of different historical facts within different civilizations constitutes a logical starting point to their discovery or constitution. The individuality that he gives his cultural entities is far less strict, naturalistic, or ‘unconsciously fictional’ than Spengler’s work.” (Illich, p. 10) Toynbee and Spengler are compared by Illich as follows:

As much as Toynbee's claim of a ‘practical simultaneity’ of civilizations, that is, a materialistic interpretation of the Rankean divine immediacy of epochs, might remind us of Spengler’s historical pluralism because of its relative seclusion, we must never forget, that what is a precondition in Spengler’s work – i.e., the isolation of cultures and these cultures’ inner character traits and individuality,

which makes them simultaneous if contemplated by a historian – is just a necessary tool for Toynbee, which he uses to be able to compare cultures. (Illich, p. 11)

Illich does not write about Spengler's ideas of decline, although these were of scientific and political importance. One also searches in vain for a comparison of this issue within Toynbee's ideas. As far as the history of ideas is concerned, Spengler was rather influenced by Goethe and Nietzsche, while Toynbee's home is in English philosophy. This would have been a good chance for a discussion of these different roots. One could have compared Spengler's plant model of history—from growing to flowering and dying—with Toynbee's model of development.

The analysis of the national historical approach and the comparison with Toynbee's universal-historical ideas falls short as well. "As much as Spengler made a biological concept the starting point of his category system, as much was the latter political and administrative. To avoid these false ways of looking at history—particularly in relation to the central category, namely the 'viable unit'—it is necessary for Toynbee to uncover the tendencies that can be found in the historiography of the past century in order to avoid them." (Illich, pp. 11-12)

According to Toynbee, in the 19th century, it was especially industrialism and nationalism that greatly influenced the writing of history. The material object of history, on the other hand, lies in intelligible, comparable entities that Toynbee aims to define to show how they differ from Spengler's biologism and from subjectivism. In doing so, he seizes history in its wholeness. Illich concludes, "Civilization is the concretization of

forward pressing human development and realization of new concepts, based on free will.” For Illich, none of the individual societies is identical to humanity in its entirety.

According to Toynbee, history then is a contemplation of vibrant and dynamic units of social life, which contain the entire human life in its spatio-temporal organization, whether demonstrated in its immanent development and differentiation throughout various stages and the extent of the same cultural entity in one geographical space, or demonstrated in their mutual influence.” (Illich, p. 22)

In the second main part, Illich analyzes Toynbee’s logic of history in a little under ten pages. Toynbee divides history into naturalistic units that are clearly distinct from each other. His worldview is realistic and naturalistic. “History is a number of plays, which historians are watching. The various stages and plots are simultaneously present in the historian’s mind and he can constantly compare them.” (Illich, p. 23) Toynbee is a chronicler, a historian of the past. The material object determines the method, which leads to a lack of precision in definitions.

The simplest and best way, which has been employed for historio-metaphysical demonstration from the beginning of time, is the myth – be it in early times by means of deliberate personifications as seen in the creation of Prometheus and Zeus or of Faust and Mephistopheles, Job and God, an owl or Athene, or as seen more recently when these fictions are more ‘scientifically’ called archetypes or ‘basic principles of metaphysics.’ (Illich, p. 29)

In this section, Illich clarifies his methodological considerations. He analyzes Toynbee’s scientific method according to Bacon. The way to awareness lies in the construction of hypotheses in the form of questions addressed to history. The object must be part of the experiment in order to be able to provide answers.

“Before Toynbee even started his historical research, it becomes apparent how again and again a priori hypothetical schemes of questions are being constructed – theoretically these are being supported in their generality by an eclectic selection of thinkers that are then verified in an ‘experiment’. Be it that he wants to prove

that the genius in a decaying civilization, who behaves like a savior and raises his sword, dies by that sword; or be it that there are forces of nature that are stronger than the vitality of a single civilization; or be it that the brilliant mystic has to undergo solitude before he can become the leader of society – the theoretical-psychological reason of phenomena found in the Bible; Smuts, Holism & Evolution; Bergson, or the experience of a horse breeder always has to be ‘proven’ first – only to then demonstrate the a-posterioristic reality of these facts by showing a rich collection of historical facts, compared to which the theoretical principals appear as schemes of questions. (Illich, p. 31)

Illich further clarifies:

The illusion, the criterions of conceptualization, has to be found in facts of experience, given that these were clearly arranged according to nominalist schemes, while their internal comparability is being accepted as empirical fact without providing explanations or proof and while this should be impossible giving the denial of all conditions of historical development.” (Illich, p. 32)

Toynbee is empirical in his methods and associative in the formation of concepts. In his magnum opus, this causes a growing opposition compared to his attempt at developing a transcendental and teleological concept of ethics.

In the third main chapter, Illich illustrates Toynbee’s ontology. His starting point here is the term of mystical or creative personality and its influence on society as a whole. Illich does not attempt to criticize Toynbee in his role as a skilled historian, he rather wants to illustrate his eclectic method that has not been demonstrated before. He does not see Toynbee as a “pure positivist,” as he is usually described, but also not as a “scientist.” This is why Illich stresses the stylistic expression, the descriptive power, the wealth of general knowledge, the brilliant descriptions etc. Moreover, Toynbee’s unspoken statements are just as important as his written statements. “The impulse for most critics is the fact that for Toynbee, the categories of history are already formed before he even

approaches history and that he takes Spencer's theory of evolution and Bergson's élan vital as more original concepts than individual historical facts." (Illich. P. 36)

It can be said that Toynbee approaches history as a philosopher, more precisely as a metaphysician. What, then, is the element that sets history in motion? The driving power of history are not races or the environment, but also not God or his antagonist. According to Toynbee, civilization is based on the personal encounter between the "life" of an individual person and the environment. "Becoming" is the coming together of inner vitality and the environment: challenge and response. The origin of becoming lies in the soul of every human. Therefore, a schematic account of history is inadequate.

The optimal stimulus – the golden middle – is thus the one that allows life a 'rhythmic' response and assertion, i.e. the one that permits life to have a dynamic which in turn permits a design that by means of his own performance in the environment becomes objective form and meets demands of life. (Illich, p. 46)

Life has to be awakened by the environment. With the realization of an idea in the environment, the environment can become a world again. Overcoming the natural necessities means a 'spirituality' or 'etherialization' of the world. What is the meaning of the unfolding of history? The older Toynbee becomes, the more religious is his reasoning. As the world hinders life in its freedom, the more it becomes a task for him. "If 'challenge' is a call by the guardian or revivalist, he determines the moment and the kind of the beginning of history." (Illich, p. 51) Toynbee assumes that every civilization has an inherent goal and is still comparable. The fact that individuals are conceived, born, and then die makes them comparable. Where then is the last true reason for this cycle, that is, for the absurdity of history? As a liberal Protestant, Toynbee refers to original sin in this context. Original sin paralyzes the creative powers of the individual person who wants to

deal with its challenges and form them. The scientist draws on a religious explanation here. "Life just demands a theology of life." Toynbee bases his conception of history on personality and its relationship to society. Thus, he distances himself from atomistic and organic conceptions. In this regard, Illich accuses him of superficiality: "His nominalism makes it impossible for him, ..., to develop an adequate social theory." (Illich, p. 63)

"Toynbee's analyses always stagnate at this point of view, which from a theoretical stance is superficial, he does not manage to locate the true root of the children of German idealism." (Illich, p. 66)

Toynbee defines society as an impersonal relationship. "Thus, Toynbee wants to find a handle in the concept of institutions as a general picture of impersonal relationships between individuals in a society, in order to treat social phenomena as neither atomistic nor organic." (Illich, p. 69) Illich enjoys following Toynbee's brilliant thoughts, "but when he does metaphysics, he is no longer convincing." (Illich, pp. 70-71) According to Toynbee, only the individual carries history. At the same time, history is the genesis of civilization. Here, Illich accuses Toynbee of "not being able to come to a true synthesis of basic principles." (Illich, p. 75) According to Toynbee, personality influences society. Illich writes,

The drive of a creative personality to create his fellow men after his own ideal is based on the fact that, according to the proposed hypothesis, the genius's field of influence coincides with that of society. It follows from the sociological fact that identity of life, activity, and the field of influence of every individual person spans the entire field and identifies with this field, that no re-creation of personality is completed until its field of influence has adapted to that of the entire institution, or until personality has adapted in its own, novel model to the shape of relations that make up an institution. (Illich, pp. 79-80)

Historical figures are role models and guides. They face difficult tasks. This requires great vitality and concentration, which can be developed through contemplation. “Withdrawal & return” are necessary concomitants of “challenge and response.” Creative people in history have a mimetic relationship with their fellow men, that is, their spirituality spreads. A civilization dies if there are no more creative personalities, or if the mimetic forces weaken. Illich closes his work with the following hope: “I hope to have successfully shown that the basic categories of Toynbee’s historiography, which were described in this work, mostly follow logically from his conception of the material dialectic of history according to which growth of a civilization is a sign of success – and decay or visualization of internal defeat is the will before the law of nature.” (Illich, p. 83)

What are the messages of this newly ordained priest and successful recipient of a PhD in 1951? Toynbee is a brilliant, vivid universal historian, with an associative method that can only be grasped philosophically. Illich’s work includes some superficialities and contradictions. The relationship between science and religion has not been satisfactorily resolved in his dissertation. Readers do not learn about his criticism of religion or civilization in this work (these have been published later by Illich since Aug. 2004), rather this is an effort to put some of Toynbee’s basic considerations into words. While doing so, Illich intersperses them with a few critical notes on his theory. Even in his early work, Ivan Illich challenges his readers with his high intellectual level of thought. Nevertheless, one constantly fluctuates between admiration and rejection. What is admirable is Illich’s sense for the methodological problems and relationships in Toynbee’s writing. Furthermore, the elegant, concise style and the highly abstract level of writing are admirable. The reader is skeptical of the title of the dissertation though. One

would have expected the philosophical foundations in Toynbee's work. But instead, the reader gets elegant, methodological considerations. In addition to that, there are no direct statements on Toynbee's part concerning the historical process or historical events. Also there are mostly no content-related statements. We do not learn whether Toynbee has an optimistic or pessimistic view of history. It is further debatable whether it is already possible to adequately assess Toynbee's work in 1951. Moreover, Toynbee is usually associated mainly with the concept of culture. Origin, growth, and decay are being explained as challenge and response. Cultures are in this respect "wheels" on the wagon of religion, the highest of which is Christianity. Toynbee analyzes these from a rationalistic, optimistic perspective. Illich bases his argumentation primarily on Toynbee's concept of civilization and does not address his concept of culture and its connection to religion and Christianity.

This dissertation is worded in a sensitive and positive way. The structure of the main part, divided into General Regulations, Historical Logic, and Ontology is productive, even though Toynbee's holistic concept is being cut into pieces here. This is, however, inevitable. In some instances, strong criticism shines through: tautological arguments, assertions rather than evidence, superficiality, lack of theoretical foundation of the concept of individuality. The allegations, however, are not being explained and justified, which makes it difficult to judge the author's own position. Some of the subchapters—on Spengler and on Toynbee's path—are very short and deserved to be longer. The appendix with annotations and footnotes is very helpful and impressive in its multilingualism. This work addresses profound issues of the century, it intuitively captures many neuralgic points of discussion with great sensitivity and without neglecting attention to detail. This

work encourages its readers to concern themselves more strongly and more intensively with universal history and with Toynbee and Spengler. It is a combination of intelligence and cleverness.

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