

## **Gender: Notes To the Text<sup>1</sup>**

**Fabio Milana**

### **1.**

The text that is being proposed again here after thirty years is a rare one by Ivan Illich that has not been republished, reprinted or even just received renewed interest in the meantime. This is true for the whole of Europe, if we exclude the exception of Germany, where a second edition was published in 1995, with the cooperation of the still-living author. The title is obviously included in the posthumous *Oeuvres Complètes* of 2004-05, though in a “transposition” that Illich had praised at the time as “*l’exact équivalent*” of his own text in the local “vernacular,” but which together with this quality presents a marked autonomy from the original English version.<sup>2</sup>

### **2.**

It is known that Illich brought *Gender* to completion during a long stay at the Wissenschaftskolleg in West Berlin (October 1981 -- April 1982), planned expressly in view of this commitment. A first draft of the essay already existed, however, co-

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was first published as an afterword in I. Illich, *Genere. Per una critica storica dell’uguaglianza*, Neri Pozza, Vicenza 2013. A second edition of the book was issued in October 2016 with the title, *Gender. Per una critica storica dell’uguaglianza*. Notably, the word *gender* has become an Italian word during the last two years, due to the Catholic mobilization against a so called “gender theory” (in Butler’s sense of the term). Quotations bear reference to the paging of the original version (1982). The present English translation is by Jane Upchurch. After the composition of this text, two noticeable books of memories appeared in Europe concerning the same subject: Franco La Cecla’s, *Ivan Illich e la sua eredità* (Medusa: Milano, 2013) and Uwe Pörksen’s, *Camelot in Grunewald. Szenen aus dem intellektuellen Leben der achtziger Jahre* (C.H. Beck: München, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Some explanations are omitted at this point, about special choices in revising the previous Italian translation, and particularly about the terms or expressions “tools” (*strumenti/utensili*), “broken gender” (*genere dimidiato*), “vernacular speech” (*lingua dell’uso vernacolare*), “taught mother tongue” (*madrelingua insegnata*) and the adjective “gendered” (in recent Italian: *di genere*). This section of the original paper concluded: “That which, after what is by now a considerable time, will appear more easily for what it is, the only important male contribution to the development of a ‘philosophy of gender,’ will not be more easily received just because of this, but perhaps it will be more calmly discussed, or at least finally put in records.”

authored with Lee Hoinacki in the summer of 1981, as the author tells us in the foreword to the first edition. It was documented “in real time” by Valentina Borremans in her “Tecno-Politica” series with the title, *Vernacular Gender* (“as of July 1981”). It was just the start of another of those swarms of temporary or collateral publications that normally accompanied the appearance of one of Illich’s major titles and which makes his bibliography a kind of brain-teaser. Preserved in them, though, is a trace of the circumstances and the way in which he prepared his campaigns of intellectual agitation. Opening this first known draft, for example, it is immediately clear how the author aimed to complete and formally present his research at the seminar in Berkeley, only expected for the end of the following year, probably taking into account also the prestige of that location. In the meantime, adhering to the customs of “Tecno-Politica,” he authorized his text to be reproduced in any kind of journal (ample excerpts came out in *CoEvolution Quarterly* in March 1982, for example), or even in volume form up to a maximum of 250 copies, in view of some preliminary penetration of the theories of the essay. Thanks to a piece of news in the editorial note of *Vom Recht auf Gemeinheit* (1982; in Italian *Lavoro ombra*, 1985), we know that in November 1981 the text was already in the hands of Ruth Kriss-Rettenbeck, who used it in a seminar at the University of Munich and at the same time was translating it into German. In all likelihood it was this version that was discussed at the faculty of theology of the University of Marburg in the first months of 1982, to which the author refers in the foreword to the 1995 German republication. However, we do not know exactly what stage of development the work was at. The original draft is entirely used in the final version, but whereas in the first part (corresponding to the current chapters I and II) the concordances are both ample and literal, in the second one (current chapters III-V) integrations and changes of position gradually increase, while in the last one (chapters

VI-VII) they become preponderant. We can say with relative certainty that the long chapter on religious history that embraces the theme of penitence and then all of *The Iconography of Sex*, as well as the theory of a transition period under the system of “broken gender,” both belong to a later stage of development of the essay.

But it is also more interesting to observe the “high definition” of this first, though partial draft, which became part of the final text with few adjustments, mostly in the margins of the paragraphs, mainly to confer more brilliance to the endings of the sentences. Right from the start, the author has in mind a handy and engaging pamphlet, able to circulate autonomously from that apparatus of glosses that will only be added subsequently, as a second supporting text and counterpoint, this time aiming at a generally academic audience. That the long stay in Germany was chiefly destined to provide an in-depth bibliographical analysis, as would be deposited in the very rich “titled footnotes,” is also borne witness to by the beautiful recollection of those months left by Gesine Bottomley, librarian at the Wissenschaftskolleg.

The only just-founded Berlin-based institute, modeled on the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton University, hosted eighteen fellows in that first year of activity, among them a certain Gershom Scholem in the last months of his life, and among others Uwe Pörksen, to whom we owe the memory of the stormy conference with Illich on “*Genus und Sexus*.” But Pörksen is mainly the one who a few years later would give a convincing phenomenology of the “Key words” here in footnote 2, fittingly renaming them *Plastikwörter* or “plastic words”—an expression soon acknowledged and re-launched by Illich himself and today better codified than the previous one. Other scholars gathered around Illich in those months, involving themselves in different ways in the process of developing the text: among them Ludolf Kuchenbuch, who, with his work as a medievalist, corroborated and enriched the

categorical framework of *Gender* then and afterwards. Also present was a young Franco La Cecla, whose very successive *Modi bruschi* (2000) likewise gathered and developed far-off input. Above all, the presence of Barbara Duden should be underlined, to whose studies, interests and polemic stimuli Illich attributes the origin of his research. Duden then accompanied it step-by-step, contributing at the end to “mediating” it to the German public, in particular with a re-working of the “thematic footnotes” that make that edition almost incomparable with any other. Also present were two Italian women scholars, Raffaella Lamberti and Gianna Pomata, who in 1981 initiated the *Centro di Documentazione, Ricerca e Iniziativa delle Donne* (Women’s Documentation, Research and Enterprise Centre) in Bologna. In the same year that these women began this well-known feminist initiative in Bologna, they also began a friendship with Illich in Berlin.

Grown within such an interweaving of relationships (or much wider, as it is reasonable to suppose), the book should have appeared in the US towards the end of the summer of 1982, in time for the students at Berkeley to take a look at it before the start of the Regents Lectures, as required by the announcement of the first of these scheduled for 30<sup>th</sup> September. There was most likely a makeshift edition in circulation, destined just for those students and procured once again by “Tecno-politica,” in concert with the University of Pennsylvania (in the meantime Valentina Borremans, too, was exploring the technical transformations of the “*agobio de las mujeres*” on her own). In its almost definitive form, though still devoid of footnotes, the essay had meanwhile appeared in July in the Canadian journal, *Alternatives*. However, the first edition by Pantheon Books, which established the text and fixed the title as *Gender* (with doubts from the publisher, while Illich expressed feeling somewhere between proud and amused), was not released until the end of the year. The following year,

1983, there was Marion Boyars' English version, the already-mentioned French edition by *Le Seuil*, which was called the *Le genre vernaculaire*, and Rowohlt's German version, which added the explanatory subtitle, *Zu einer historischen Kritik der Gleichheit* to the unwanted *Genus* of the title.

A year later, in 1984, the Italian edition took up the subtitle (*Per una critica storica dell'uguaglianza – For a historical critique of equality*), as a complement to the certainly less esoteric title of the whole series (*Il genere e il sesso – Gender and Sex*), devoid however of the didactic zeal of a contemporary Dutch version, which placed a sculptural *Man/Vrouw* (“Man/Woman”) before everything else. The Swedish (1985) and Danish (1986) editions are aligned with the German title. The Spanish version, which Gustavo Esteva collaborated on, did not appear in Mexico until 1990, returning to the *Género vernáculo* preferred in Cuernavaca.

Beyond the pillars of Hercules of our West, the Japanese case is remarkable, with three editions in twenty years (1984, 1998, 2005). Here, Yoshiro Tamanoi's version introduced in *nihongo* not only the fortunate neologism of the title *Jendā* (immediately specified by *onna* and *otoko*, “woman” and “man,” in this case), but together with this also a concept around which an influential, long-lasting intellectual and political debate focused, to the point that Illich, Duden and Tamanoi had to intervene once again (1986) to deepen and clarify. In more recent years the book approached the two side entrances of the Islamic world, with the Turkish (1996) and Indonesian editions (2007), the latter proposed as “The Loss of Gender.” A wide and slow diffusion, can be seen, with different degrees of in-depth penetration, borne witness to by the re-emergence of the lemmas “vernacular” and “gender”, put together in recent social-anthropological studies with an explicit or not reference to Illich, but with the debt owed to him being clear.

### 3.

Thematically, the prehistory of the essay goes back to *Medical Nemesis* (1975). This is not only because, as the author himself recalled many times, it was on the occasion of the presentation of this book at Harvard that he had to face Norma Swenson's unexpected provocation: "Prof. Illich, have you ever seen 'a human body'?" Also, as Giovanna Morelli has so conveniently underlined, precisely in that book something like a historical quality of the body, the senses, the flesh, takes shape in the interests of its author, already hinting at a genealogical approach to the research themes. This different positioning can be recognized at work in the writings that immediately followed, in particular the essay on *Shadow Work* which introduces the notions of the *economic neutrality of sex* and its *polarization* in productive work and *shadow work*, in fact. Such notions are illustrated as relative to further and conflicting historical phenomena with respect to a previous "vernacular" universe, which the essay rediscovers in parallel and puts into words. It then spreads through these passages of history of economics, the family, the couple and of women in all this, also in the substantial appendix of titled glosses (however, rewritten and shortened, remarkably, in the above-mentioned German edition, as in the Italian that stems from it), which already prefigure the content and form of *Gender*. One gets no further than the second chapter of this subsequent work, though, therefore of its *pars destruens*, and the connection between genealogical method on the one hand, notion and perspective "of gender" on the other, still has not been worked at this level (1980). In what way it was produced, evidently between 1980 and 1981, with the unearthing of the "vernacular gender" and its promotion to "ideal type", able to act as a parameter in the evolution of Western societies, does not seem possible to establish for certain. A

possibly eloquent clue is found in the Tokyo speech on “common peace” (December 1980) and in the Marburg one on “ecumenical we” (winter 1980-81) that we read at the end of *Vom Recht auf Gemeinheit*. Here Illich distances himself from that universalism to be exported, of both Enlightenment and Christian origins (as he now begins to perceive, or explicitly starts to say), that makes a desert of the differences and then calls it “man” (the “we,” “peace,” the “Church,” etc). It is about a motive that is always underlying the agitation of thought promoted by him, but errors excepted, openly thematized and made the object of controversy only starting from these writings, which also contemplate or at least allude to something close to the difference “of gender.” But the term itself, and above all its conceptual opposition to “economic sex,” are still missing—what can be speculated is how a leap beyond a preliminary context which was strongly marked by the prevalence of German-speaking interlocutors, does not seem in turn subordinate to the same culture. It is conceivable that not by chance the prompt slating of the book by the New York Times (January 1983) carried in the title an ironic *Vive la différence!* See footnote 56 in regard to this (with the decisive reference reduced in the French and German versions, though).

Illich was well aware of the intervening “leap”—“what I am finding in my attempt to write a history of gender and the economics of scarcity is that this approach serves me as a better heuristic investigating tool than anything I have had in hand so far,” is reported in the editorial of *CoEvolution Quarterly*. Based on a philosophical anthropology, let’s call it thus, free from the undifferentiated *anthropos* of “human” sciences, he could consider himself to have identified an extraordinarily sensitive historical index for processes that were the subject of his research, and earned a more elementary and solid foundation, more intimately incarnated in the historical experience of living women and men, to his criticism of modern conceptions and

institutions. Perhaps the exceptional fervour of studies, relationships and activities that characterize the year spent between Berlin and Berkeley is owed to the enthusiasm of this discovery. Or one can believe, with La Cecla's testimony, that his recently recognised illness and the prospect of imminent death induced Illich to the extreme effort of giving complete testimony of himself, or to himself.

#### 4.

However a "descent to the mothers" had started for him with the decision to return to Germany at the end of 1979, overcoming the bewilderment of those, like Hoinacki, who were not able to explain the availability of their friend towards the country that had exterminated several members of his maternal family. Fortunately things were not like that at all for those ancestors, albeit "diagnosed" as "Jewish" in the years of the *Anschluss* and diligently persecuted. Illich was no less aware, however, that he was returning to the land and the language of a trauma. The Berlin episode recalled more than once by Duden (of an ex-Nazi officer who turned up at an hotel room with a message that will remain unknown since the receiver, suddenly a terrified young man, closed the door on impulse) bears witness to an all too reactive state of alert. On the other hand, was it not perhaps the bribes, that the adolescent Ivan delivered on behalf of his grandfather to some representative of the occupying authorities, in the first degree of that "demonic dimension" which he will speak about at the end of the essay on *Shadow work*, and that at its peak would come to the point of extorting "unpaid work from the Jew in the camp [...] exacted from him as his due contribution to his own extinction"? An exemplary revelation of the *mysterium iniquitatis* had appeared in those circumstances, what afterwards would be perfected in the dynamics of the so-called "development" and of every other do-goodism attached

to it: the perversion of a “scientifically” discriminated people, up to the point of making them a player in agreement with their own annihilation. In the writings of these years, Illich indicated the fulfilled form of that in *sexism* (which the feminist movement of “emancipation” seemed to him only a deeper integration and internalization of). In the game of abbreviations introduced at footnote 59 (neglected by all the translations, but reinstated here in its original tenor) most likely Illich alludes to this dark genealogy.

At just over fifty years of age and on the threshold of a long-lasting “conservative revolution,” Illich was nevertheless aware of the closure of a phase of his, but not only his, life. Behind him he had the failure of a new start in the Far East, whose fabulous distances he had already cultivated in his adolescent readings. In Kassel, 1979-1981, he had started teaching medieval history, which involved the calculated regression to certain studies carried out in Salzburg thirty years before, between 1950 and 1951, around the time of his ordination as a priest and just before his emigration to the United States. Also his getting in touch with Lenz Kriss-Rettenbeck again, a companion and witness of that study period, and a fellow disciple of that *Christliche Volkskunde*, which now, with his wife Ruth, he was one of the leading experts on in the German-speaking sphere (the “popular piety” that was well-known to the young Ivan of the Vienna years, as well as his verses as a boy), came the same full circle through a different path. It was about earning a placement unrelated to the dialectics of the present, stepping back in historical time to the bifurcation of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, as the author has explained several times; but simultaneously, also going back in living time, until the potentially inaugural season of a life then not chosen as one’s own. Added to this – begging pardon for an inventory put together so summarily – the turning-point meeting with Barbara Duden; the illness that was believed to be

fatal as mentioned above; and even the military escalation between the blocs that deployed new nuclear missiles in Europe and involved Prof. Illich in the mobilisation of young students in Kassel—the elementary roles of life and death (birth and parents, one’s own and the opposite sex, the religious and civil profession, evil threatened or inflicted) were all present in, or at least underlying, the elaboration process of the book.

It is difficult, for example, that from a sentence like the one on p. 124 (“at the turn of the twentieth century, in Massachusetts earlier than in Berlin or Milan, genderless hospital birth [...] began to be advertised as a benefit for the mother herself”) he completely excluded the “memory” of his own birth in a Viennese clinic, in 1926, hundreds of miles away from his Dalmatian *domus*. It is just as difficult, for the informed reader, not to recognize in the features of remote Montailou (“it is the *domus* that counts, even more than spouse or child. Not the naked family, but the *domus* is subsistent and autarchic—it reproduces itself in offspring,” p. 117), a coefficient of that transfiguration of *Ilić Dvor* in Sutivan (“on my non-Jewish side, I was trained to say that a son is given to the house,” can be read in the *Conversation with David Cayley*; or said negatively: “[it would have been] impossible for me to give children to these towers down on the island in Dalmatia where my grandfathers and great-grandfathers made children”), that Illich gradually nurtured through the years, together with the decision to never be able to go back there again.

It is also unlikely that Father Tromp’s quote (footnote 113) was not accompanied by the recollection of studies at the Gregorian University, when the editor of the encyclical *Mystici Corporis* had introduced him to the first treaties of fundamental theology, among them *de ecclesia*. It was about the Church that had welcomed and moulded him, and which Father Illich had been a very active part of,

and was still part of, although as a compiler of a reprimand, that is hard to imagine as not being onerous for him. (pp.189 ff.) Too, it was about the thought of the sacraments received many times and more often administered, above all penitence, reread now as “perversion of the early Christian idea of reform.” (footnotes 114-115, excluded though, or partially camouflaged in others, in the German edition)

And perhaps one should have the courage to go further, to ask oneself what it could mean for a man at the peak of his maturity, to have to disown himself as a “man,” that is as a member of an undifferentiated “mankind,” and to divest himself of his “person,” that is the universal neutral divider of that whole, the abstract support of a mass of ascribed needs-rights-consumption—and the ridding himself of his “sex” as a simple “attribute,” perceiving rather the “taste of rape” intrinsic to “modern sexism” (footnote 20), little matter if with the face of violence or of virtue, and asking himself what “chastity” really is.

## 5.

Perhaps only in the point-blank statement that concludes the first chapter, “about the future I know and say nothing,” the indirect reminiscence emerges of a text that, without being a source for *Gender*, probably forms something much more decisive for it. It is about the book *Die Frau vor der Zukunft* (‘Woman facing the future’) that Illich’s mother had written in New York and published in Vienna in 1961, under the pseudonym of E.[llen] R.[ose] Maexie (the nickname given to her in the family). With this pseudonym, she had lived a kind of “secret public life” starting from 1946 (news of this is given for the first time here), entering into contact with famous intellectuals and publishing some articles in journals before the volume came out in Herold (a publishing house) complete with an *imprimatur* from the archdiocese of Vienna. It is

not possible here, and it would be too arduous in any case, to try to make a coherent profile of this woman. Suffice it to say that there is no trace of her writing activity before 1943, when, in Florence where she had found refuge with her children, but now under German occupation, she set her hand to writing some family *Chronicles* in order to save the memory of a past in flames for her children. Still of a narrative nature, though “fictitious,” are the first texts, between 1945 and 1947, in which she reacts to a rather more radical *Disintegration* of the historical-natural cosmos she loved—the explosion of Hiroshima. Not much can be added to her relationship with her eldest son, for which there is no available direct documentation, apart from her will entrusting “all papers, manuscripts and personal writings” to Ivan with the exclusive right “to decide what to do with them.” He will do something more and different, he will start to put down his own writings and publish them under his own name, already in the year after Maexie’s death in 1965. His mother’s legacy, in any case, is enough to bear witness to a significant (even) intellectual understanding, a partnership in whose balance of influences, presumably reciprocal, the weight of contributions and relationships will gradually be modified through time. However, it would continue to nourish itself thanks to the cohabitation of the two in the territory of the same New York parish where Ivan exercised his ministry (and she showed herself to be quite well informed also about the years when he was based in Puerto Rico, 1956-60, the same as those of the conception and composition of the volume).

Ignored at the time and rarely reread, *Die Frau vor der Zukunft*, presents a rather surprising line of reasoning that ends up bestowing a singular profile to a theory whose centre was not exactly unknown to Catholic culture (to a Gertrud von Le Fort, to mention one at its highest level) nor to Protestant reflection either (Charlotte von Kirschbaum, to remain within the German-speaking sphere). Similarly, not too

heterogeneous, either, to the American way of life in the 1950s as rendered and “disenchanted” at the same time by Betty Friedan just a couple of years after Maexie’s book.

A post-modern era (“*post-moderne Zeitalter*”) is at the door, the author claims – since the modern one, marked by the male technical hubris, came in with the final and catastrophic phase of the Atomic Age. Women are the pioneers of this new era (“eschatological,” since mankind’s salvation or destruction are involved). Not the (deceptively) “emancipated” ones, according to the model represented and imposed by man (“in a form to which no woman of the previous generations would ever have lowered herself”), but those who had remained happily “backward” (in the same way as mission populations, Maexie points out – on which we try, under a mask of charity but fortunately without success, to impose Western culture and lifestyle along with Christian faith ). These, for this reason have maintained or intend to recover a relationship with “traditional” values and behaviour. The reader of *Gender* already knows, from these few signs, why it is necessary to stop and consider this precedent, but we can even go a little further. The traditional *Weiblichkeit*, which also natural law and biblical revelation depose in favour of, contemplates an instrumental and subordinate position of woman next to and at the service of man, “lord of creation.” Yet, it is precisely such a position as “mediatrix” and “co-redemptrix,” according to God’s plan of redemption (and by now also according to Church awareness, after the developments of Mariology and after the introduction of the apostolate of the laity), that authorises women to take on the role of guides (“*Führerinnen*”) in the current crisis, to exercise their mission of natural and spiritual “bringing into the world” of humanity that, in the present hour, takes on the characteristics of an authentic *Reintegration*.

But this will only be possible for them provided that they reclaim awareness of their own essential *diversity*. Moreover, it is precisely “the Judeo-Christian tradition that tells us that man and woman are different, because God made them different, with different vocations and different missions, though with the same aim of loving God,” opposing that neutralizing process (“*Neutralisierungsprozess*”) that assimilates men and women more and more into a “*uniforme Indifferenz*,” especially in the West. And provided that women fully recover their practical authority and autonomy in the “domain” that traditional societies had always recognised as theirs and no man had ever dreamed of contending. Of course, it will not be easy for men, even those with the best intentions, to recognise now not only *the absolute equal rights of women as women* in their integral difference (“*in ihrer ganzen Verschiedenartigkeit*”) but even their *superiority within the sphere of action that belongs to them* (“*ihre Uberlegenheit im eigensten Wirkungskreis*”). Whereas other men, as “scientific experimenters,” intervene more and more heavily to devastate once-protected areas such as education, nutrition, “*psychohygiene*.” In the ecclesial field, however, “as long as a better intelligence of women’s needs hasn’t become common domain, the *self-help* of women among themselves will be one of the main tasks of the female apostolate of the laity, and through this the most autonomous and expert ones will help their sisters, so confused and unhappy today, to ‘understand themselves.’”

It is not possible here, neither would it always be enlightening, to follow Maexie in her illustration of female diversity. It is not even possible to relate in detail her criticism of the totalitarianism creeping into the “free world,” conducted on the basis of a mainly Anglo-Saxon “critical thought” (Orwell, Huxley, Packard, Galbraith, Mumford, Riesman, Lippmann), but framed in the atmosphere of Soloviev’s *Antichrist*. It would be relevant for us on several points, for example, where she

introduces a contrast between *Heim* and *Wohnstätte*, home and residence, or denounces the pressure of the *Volkskapitalismus* on housewives, proclaiming the need for a *Konsum-askese* organised by them (here in the footsteps, though rather more delicate, of Dorothy Dohen).

One cannot even relate in depth, her argument against scholastic philosophy and the hoped-for “return to the fathers” by the “Christian gnosis,” which would mean Roman Catholicism renewing relations with eastern spiritual trends, with mystic experience and with the rabbinic tradition. Neither can one linger on the ecclesial geography that the author outlines (with a group of “radical postmodernists” wedged between progressives and conservatives) on the eve of a Council already called but never named in a book that, perhaps, owes the broadness of its horizons and the boldness of its reformatory intentions to the climate of expectation aroused by that announcement. On the other hand, it is not to be believed that such a vast subject integrates itself effortlessly or without leaving large areas of shadow. Neither can it be believed that the perpetual assertiveness of the author, so similar to that of her son but without his brilliance, never sounds naive or fanciful. Besides, we should not overlook the fact that Maexie’s theories, just because they are theories, are inconsistent with a “traditional” female universe which in fact she had never really been part of, if for no other reason than her “class privilege,” as her abandonment of the marital home after only few years of marriage shows. This theme has never been touched on in a book that does not hesitate to deal with far more thorny topical questions, and always from a conservative position driven to mysticism. As far as we are directly concerned, it would be above all gratuitous to let readers believe that the theories in the book were simply Ivan’s theories, or derived directly from him, and that he had complete awareness of them, then or later on.

However, having taken these reduction and precautionary measures, the conclusion that stands out when reading what it is not excessive to define as the sinopia of *Gender*, is how in this work Illich has reactivated an interweaving of thoughts necessarily “familiar” to him for a long time. Such thoughts were probably obscured by the overlapping of other urgencies, forgotten perhaps in the meantime, but feverishly found again or reinvented within a few months while probably under the pressure of the double state of exception, historical but no less personal, as we tried to evoke it. It placed him “before the future” again, but a future now perceived as no longer predictable or producible, and alien therefore, for the first time, from any “reformatory” prospect. A deeper “regression” in every sense, for a more adventurous restart in every sense, as they appeared to be to most of the witnesses of his unexpected swerve, finding him, too, unprepared in the face of its consequences.

## 6.

It is known that after the last of eight sessions of the Berkeley seminar, in autumn 1982, the unease of the female audience, or at least a good part of it, found expression at the symposium called by seven women scholars, six of whom were lecturers at the same university (“Is he taking us for a ride?”). The author of *Gender*, invited and contested, had no more than fifteen minutes to respond to the criticism of the speakers; they considered that he had had twenty-four hours to spread his doctrines, and the count was still heavily in his favour. We don’t know how he got through in these circumstances because, as was his habit, he did not allow his intervention to be recorded (it seems he said “To be taped is to be raped,” to the bewilderment of the onlookers). The opponents limited themselves to publishing only their own interventions in the March 1983 edition of “Feminist Issues.” The fortunes

and misfortunes of the book persistently attached themselves to this episode, feeding each other for a long time in the ambiguous light of a “scandal” both denounced and claimed. Illich himself procured about a thousand copies of the journal with the intention of distributing it to anyone he wished to make aware, in such a paradoxical way, of his own position, as he explained in the *Conversation* with Cayley (in a passage (p. 186) that cannot be read in any of the available translations). He held back at the last minute for a “gender” scruple: “No, a gentleman doesn’t do this.”

Though with differing tones, those first criticisms were total and head-on, a prior obstruction of a book, or a signature, which they showed they considered seriously dangerous. Of course they expressed an immediate rebuff on behalf of a recent and winning movement of women, little prepared to be told from above or from the outside what their mindset should be. But it was also the reaction of an academic system that felt challenged (not simply in its Women’s Studies, but in the whole range of disciplines involved in them, each one with its own “scientific” framework, technical language, specialized literature, happily exempt from any suspicion of bias). And along with that, it was the comforting redress of the democratic, progressive, lay, modernizing etc, self-evidence. In this different balance sheet of the resources in the field, the “tables” were more than turned, and Illich could be victoriously brushed off as a champion of the male-chauvinist reaction in progress, a socio-biologist suspected of having Nazi sympathies, a charlatan in the guise of a scholar, a nostalgic of the good old days that actually never existed, and finally a priest. The reception of *Gender* does not finish here: it was a little more favourable where it was a question of specific prehensibility of certain of its categories, for example in H. T. Wilson’s theoretical sociology; making a double exception is the friendly, timely welcome, in Italy, by Anna Del Bo Boffino, an essayist for the general public. But the tracks retraced more

often by critics had been definitively laid.

On the other hand it would not be fair, polemic excesses aside, to deny that many of the objections originate from one or another of the effective vulnerabilities of the text. Here it is worth lingering on what only after decades can be perceived better: the fact that, ultimately, Illich's speech remains a speech *on* gender but not a "gendered" one ... not "inside" gender. Neither the insurmountable "complementarity" of the two paradigms, nor the alleged impossibility of expressing it other than by "metaphor," prevent him from speaking of his "object" from a "central" and superordinate point of view. It is the viewpoint of the critique of political economy and ideologies connected to it, ultimately a "neutral" one—or rather, if only partial—conducted from a different "biased" perspective: the part of reason against the darkness of superstition, modern superstition, according to a radically "laical" and "Enlightenment" approach that later Illich himself would judge as having been unequal to the challenge.

In this sense it is not a coincidence, and does not let itself be reduced to the (mis)fortunes of the book, that the theme then eclipses from the consideration of the author and, even more so, of his followers. The author of different study campaigns every time, Illich keeps moving the battlefield, though without ever forgetting previous conquests. And on the surface, there is no trace of the central theme of *Gender* in the subsequent studies, that seem to overstep it towards a further depth and elementariness – history of matter, the body, the senses – almost as if the duality of the gender was not that pristine and uncrossable bifurcation professed, at least in places, in the book. In the 1995 foreword he indicates rather in the "history of proportionality" the continuation of the research begun with *Gender*, showing how in this book the basically dynamic motive was that of "asymmetrical" (later on "dissymmetrical") and

more specifically “ambiguous complementarity” between the genders; a motive to be reinvested in a different synthesis, of a mainly ethical character, possibly leaning on certain “gender rests.”

It should be understood in this sense also the reference to a technicality of the Trinitarian theology that Illich introduces a bit cryptically at the end of footnote 56 (annulled, though, by this one and the following footnote 57, in the German edition). In the *relatio subsistens* the stress is not so much for him on the participle, i.e. on the “coming into existence” of the divine hypostases (and therefore, by analogy, of the two genders), as rather on the noun, i.e. on the constitutive relationality of the unique divine (and therefore, proportionally, “human”) nature. This latter does not swallow or assimilate those *personae* as its own “accidents,” but it lets them be in their difference and self- subsistence. Insisting on the analogy with Trinity life: it is not an “immanent duality” that interests Illich mainly, but the “economic duality,” or rather, with his own words, “the constant *incarnation* of the symbolic duality of gender.” (p. 76)

“Symbolic,” here, as opposed to the “biological” of the context, stands for “cultural,” or even “historical-cultural.” The historic occurrence (or loss, or possible recovery) of the constitutive duality of the “human” would be therefore the basic theme of *Gender* and of the subsequent research—ultimately love, and not an ontology of genders. Yet the development in this alternative direction had been glimpsed by Illich, and even foretold as the subsequent step. (footnote 89) We do not know what held him back in his intentions, if the violence of the criticism received (“they made me realize why it would have been impossible for a Jew to speak in Germany – say, in 1934 or 1935 – about racism as a category,” he said somewhat heavily to Cayley) or a deeper difficulty, the necessity to violate-or-succumb to the *mutedness* between the genders (footnotes 56 and 89). In this second case there was a risk of “impotence and silence”

that allows the presentiment of that kind of *pavor* before the inviolability of the individual, the *individuum* that the body closes in the *ineffabile*, which can be perceived as a precise and persistent harmonic in Barbara Duden's reflections – so essential however.

For all this and more still, it is not surprising that the development of *gender studies*, which thrived quickly (the overtaking of the competitor *sex* in the list of academic titles in the English language dates from 1987), managed without Illich's contribution. In none of their variations and nuances would the concepts of gender and sex, even when contrasted, be represented as both corresponding to a social/historical formation—neither when thought of as cultural constructions would they have retained the character of mutual antitheticity. This does not necessarily destine our text to infertility in this field of thought and studies (the claim in the *queer* area recently put forward by Jennifer Levi is striking, for example). But to ward off danger it will be useful to try to circumscribe at least the most serious of the possible misunderstandings.

It springs into action where the revaluation of the “vernacular gender” induces (at least the impression of) an over-determination of the phenomenon, either for a psychological resonance (the very censured “nostalgia”), or for its suspect ideological grasp of the notions of human “nature” or “essence.” But these latter are notions which the author never uses, and not for apophatic caution, nor just because suspicious of an intrinsically “catholic”-modern concept, rising from the obliteration of the original duality. Likely it is in the conviction, an exquisitely “humanistic” one in its own way, that something eminently “symbolic” is in the running here, i.e. something historical-cultural, therefore dynamic, and ultimately *free*: the original “relationality” itself, outside this “economy,” i.e. *unexercised*, would be devoid of content and perhaps not

even expressible. Therefore the reference to the vernacular past does not have a normative value per se, even though, “ideal-typically,” it carries out a decisive function in the deconstruction by genealogical means of that same “human nature” as invented and mythicized by “catholicity”-modernity. It represents rather the place of a possible recommencement, the path that was interrupted in the woods populated by “animal spirits.” Finding it again indeed involves the regression to the “nests of the white Goddess” (p. 134), but it unlocks for itself the renewed possibility of a pertinent symbolic production.

## 7.

Of course, if things are put this way, a different problem arises—whether an *intrahistorical* criterion can exist, able to judge history itself, and for example decide that a certain one of its phases has an alienating and dehumanizing nature that another one does not, or could not have. *Humani nil*: if the “human” coincides with its *historical* manifestation, how could that which is historical not in turn be *human*, or even degenerate into its *opposite*? Specifically, what effectively enables “complementarity of gender” and “sexual polarization” to hierarchize between themselves, apart from a list of costs and benefits so controversial to be compiled. This is exactly what Sylvie Kwaschin asks the author, in the probably more pondered comment on his book. In recognizing the problem (pp.163-164), Illich refers to “a fleshed-out philosophy of gender that remains to be written” and that, as we already know, he won’t be the one who writes it. Actually, this would have involved a defection from the body of history, in search of atemporal “philosophical” criteria. In Illich’s case, the criterion of value lies instead in a *fact*, also a historical one: the Incarnation of the Word and, even before that, Mary’s “Behold the handmaid of the

Lord.” Without formally denying a transcendence, although this perspective incarnates it materially, irreparably compromising it in the human case. Neither, in consequence, can an alterity occur between a “sacred history” and a “profane” one. Nor can something of what is historical exempt itself from taking a stand, from acquiring a meaning, and loading up the burden of a specific responsibility in relation to that *fact*: which is then precisely the fact of revealed *freedom*, the freedom *to love*, it is understood, and to love not universally, but in a concrete, incarnate proportionality to one’s neighbour – as it opens together the possibility to back out instead, to abstract, to sublimate and to *neutralize*.

How does it happen then, on this basis, that a “story of salvation” is produced which leads straight to hell? This is the *mysterium* that Illich feels obsessively challenged with, and that he must also recall at the start of the 1995 republication of *Gender*, upon annexing the book, and in an eminent position, to this set of problems. He will not have the opportunity to answer that question other than in fragments, ever more penetrating, and imploring. We will not follow him in those abysses. We will simply appeal to a preoccupation that passes through the whole of his work, and not only the written one. It concerns the human pretext of *doing good*, generally and preferably *to others*. In Maexie’s words, it is the pretext of removing the cross from the world, and putting paradise in its place.

[Sept. 2013]

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[Fabio Milana, via del Castello 15, 29121 Piacenza, Italy; [fa.mil@libero.it](mailto:fa.mil@libero.it)]