

Revisiting Tools

Joey Mokos

If you are trying to make sense of the pandemic, escalating racial justice movement, schooling issues and ecological crises abounding, there is no better place to start than *Tools for Conviviality*. It is as relevant now as when it was first published in 1973. Illich invites us to peel back the layers of oppression and injustice to consider what ideologies led to the crises that beset our current era. He suggests the fundamental social structure to consider is our relationship to our tools. Tools for Illich includes both the artifacts and the processes we put in place to organize and act individually and collectively. Some tools allow for a variety of uses – i.e. a pencil, while others are more likely to be limiting by their design – i.e. a nuclear weapon. But for Illich, tools should allow people to think and act creatively and provide for a good life. Our use of tools should be limited by the extent to which they infringe on other people’s ability to use tools for their ends. This combination of creative action limited by shared claims to use of tools is what Illich calls “conviviality” –living well together. Illich believed that too often tools have limited personal creativity and action toward a good life and that it was possible to change our relationship with tools to recover conviviality as a core social structure. This framework provides a lens for looking at the present moment. By tying together disparate social, political, financial, and environmental crises, Illich invites us into a deep dive into the ideology at the root of these issues.

This shift in our relationship with tools requires a change in legal and political procedures and will lead to changes in our relationships with each other and the world around us. Tools for Illich are human products (not in the sense of a commodity, but rather the result of human thought and action). At the same time, society and tools shape the humans we are becoming. We use the tools we have created for thinking and analysis, but when the tools become the water we swim in, so to speak, we risk losing the ability to see them for what they are and re-take control. Peter Berger's dialectical framework can help illustrate this point. As he writes in *The Sacred Canopy*, "The two statements that society is a product of man and that man is the product of society, are not contradictory. They rather reflect the inherently dialectic character of the social phenomenon." (page 3). This dialectic process is composed of three moments: 1. Externalization, 2. Objectivation, 3. Internalization. These correspond to 1. The creative thought and action of people, 2. The observable results of that thought and action, 3. The way we turn the external structures of the objective world into a structure of the subjective consciousness. It is precisely this process that Illich is trying to interrupt before it leads to social, economic and environmental collapse.

Illich describes three challenges to expressing limits to tools and industrial production: 1. demythologizing science, 2. rediscovery of language (revivifying language), 3. recovery of legal procedure. Each of these may help us understand current social political conflicts in the present moment: 1. statements about "what the science says" and climate change denialism, 2. confusion about the difference between 'learning' and 'schooling' or between 'healthcare' and 'healing', and 3. Black Lives Matter and Defund the Police movements.

Demythologizing Science

“This term (science) has come to mean an institutional enterprise rather than a personal activity, the solving of puzzles rather than the unpredictably creative activity of individual people.” (Tools p. 85). We have turned scientific knowledge into a commodity to be consumed or rejected. However, consumption of this knowledge leads to a stripping of personal decision making. Knowledge becomes an input to determine the proper decision. Illich states, “Overconfidence in ‘better decision making’ first hampers people’s ability to decide for themselves and then undermines their belief that they can decide.” (Tools p. 86). Further on he states, “Recourse to better knowledge produced by science not only voids personal decisions of the power to contribute to an ongoing historical and social process, it also destroys the rules of evidence by which experience is traditionally shared.” (Tools p. 87). When we hear people say, ‘the science says...’, regarding mask-wearing or climate change, it makes some people bristle because they feel it is an affront to their ability to make a personal decision or to contribute to the decision making. The knowledge itself is not a problem, it is the exclusivity of that knowledge that then strips people of the ability to contribute to the decision. We have lost agency and therefore reject it. Demythologizing science by personal pursuits could restore the usefulness of the knowledge produced by scientific pursuits. Reject, “The science says...” in favor of “This is what I learned by doing x, y, z.” This would invite people into a mutually beneficial discussion about how to engage with new evidence.

Rediscovery of Language

How we speak about things both reflects and shapes how we think and act. There seems to be an increasing shift from verbs to nouns as we turn activities into commodities. “Healing”

becomes “healthcare”; “learning” is confused with “school.” As a parent of school age children, I’ve heard countless times that school professionals worry about how much learning has been hindered or lost due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Our family even received a robocall from the school superintendent thanking us for taking care of their students during the pandemic: not only has learning become a packaged commodity of schooling, but my children have become ‘students’ belonging to the school district! Illich writes, “In a society whose language has undergone this shift, predicates come to be stated in terms of commodity and claims in terms of competition for a scarce resource. ‘I want to learn’ is translated into ‘I want to get an education.’ ... ‘I want to walk’ is restated as ‘I need transportation.’” Further on he writes, “In some societies the corruption of language has crippled the political fantasy to the point where the difference between a claim to commodities and a right to convivial tools cannot be understood. Limits on tools cannot be publicly discussed.” (Tools p. 90-91). We must recover a common language with precision, avoiding turning activities into commodities, verbs into nouns, in order to have a public political discussion about proper limits. I posit it is precisely this issue that has led to healthcare delivery for allopathic acute care far outpacing spending on public health or popular education programs. This could be said about many other sectors of the economy.

Recovery of Legal Procedure

“Along with the idolatry of the scientific method and the corruption of language, this progressive loss of confidence in political and legal processes is a major obstacle to retooling society. People come to understand that an alternative society is possible by using clear language. They can bring it about by recovering consciousness of the deep structure by which, in their society, decisions are made.” (Tools p. 92) Black Live Matters and Defund the police are

current examples of this loss of confidence and an attempt to recover consciousness of the deep structures by which decisions are made. Where the rubber hits the road for our legal system - the police - Black people are challenging the obvious discrepancies in treatment that call the system into question. Our legal system tends toward favoring corporations and wealthy light skinned people over other individuals. A legal system is made up of three components: 1. A set of laws set by a governing body, 2. Peer review and consent to how those laws are applied to a specific situation, 3. Consistency with past decisions to establish fairness over time. This system can be used as an oppressive tool or a convivial one: there should be constant assessment of the tool, setting limits on its use to prevent it from infringing on personal liberties, or promoting one group over another.

Illich anticipated that a massive political and economic inversion would be necessary and inevitable if we are to survive. This is the true sense of apocalypse. Some define this word as “the end of the world,” but it is more properly understood as an end of an epoch, the inversion of a political and economic system. Illich is hopeful that a tool like language, “possesses a fundamental structure that misuse cannot totally corrupt.” (Tools p. 106). Further, “... the transformation of catastrophe into crisis depends on the confidence of an emerging group of clear thinking and feeling people can inspire in their peers.” (Tools p. 106). This is our call to action. Illich described a problem he saw in 1973, that is just as relevant today as it was then. Understanding that problem and engaging our peers to describe the problem clearly creates the possibility of recovering our tools and ourselves.

Bibliography

Berger, Peter L. *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1967.

Illich, Ivan. *Tools for Conviviality*, London: Marion Boyars Publishers, 1973 (1990 Reprint edition).