

Is There Thought After Economics?

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The Founding Statement

In 1971, Ivan Illich pronounced the following phrase: “Beyond certain thresholds, the production of services will do more harm to culture than the production of material goods has done to nature.” Three of the books he published in the following years were illustrations of this thesis, respectively for educational services (*Deschooling Society*), transportation services (*Energy and Equity*), and medical services (*Medical Nemesis*).

From then on, Illich proposed to politically define new limits to industrial productions. He accepted the limits to material growth proposed by the ecologists but added the need for limits to the production and consumption of services. Later, he introduced a third type of limits that I will comment at the end of my talk.

The State of the Art of the Early Critique on Services and Professions

The following summary will suffice to recall the state of the debate on services and professions at CIDOC in the 1970s:

- *services* are what *professionals* provide their *clients* with;
- the *professional-client* relationship comprises three types of professional interventions;
- the professional *diagnoses* the client’s *needs*;
- he *prescribes* remedies;

- in his name, his *professional association* sues service-providers—and sometimes clients—who do not abide by the rules.

Besides, the professions establish a special relationship to technology, or, as Illich always preferred to say, to *tools*. Only professionals have access to society's high-performance tools and they enjoy a monopoly over them. Industrial tools foment especially entrenched monopolies that Illich termed *radical monopolies* which, in a kind of circular causality, reinforce professional powers.

Let's recall the main elements of the client-professional relationship: the *professional*, the *client*, the *professional-client relationship*, the *diagnosis* of the client's *needs*, the *prescription* of remedies, the prosecution of deviancies by the corresponding *professional association*. Besides, professionals carry on a *radical monopoly* on the satisfaction of *needs*.

The Historicity of Professions

Yet, the professions are a historical phenomenon: the definition of the professional act in 2013 does no longer correspond to Illich's descriptions of it in the early 1970s. In the late 1990s, Sajay Samuel, in collaboration with Illich, studied the radical changes that, since the 1970s, have affected the relations between the constituting parts of all professional interventions.¹ I hope that, in the discussion that will follow, we will come back on this great transformation and the new constellation that it generated.

¹ For a short summary of the argument, see Sajay Samuel, Le rôle des professions, *Esprit* n.367 (8/9), pp.185-192, 2010.

The *Krisis*²

After 1976, Illich became very critical of the concepts underlying his critique of institutions, professions, services, and industrial tools. He had realized that his previous works were not free from the axioms of industrial society. In his last conversations with David Cayley, he summarized his about-face as an auto-critique concerning the “mistake” he had committed by treating institutions as if they were tools or instruments, or better said as if they could be amended by restoring their instrumentality: schools should be learning instruments; roads and vehicles, tools for encounters; hospitals, healing devices. In these conversations, published as *The Rivers North of the Future*,³ Illich says that he became aware of this “mistake” thanks to a student, Thomas Peschek, who was conducting a seminar in Bremen “about the fundamental mistake of Ivan Illich.”

What Illich did not understand, according to Peschek, and he is certainly right, is that [institutions are no tools, but systems, and] when you become the user of a system, you become part of the system. [...] Thinking about the world, not in terms of causality, but in terms of system analysis has brought us into a new era, into which we couldn't have come if we hadn't moved out of the world of tools⁴

Between 1976 and 1982, Illich combed his works of the previous years in search of such concepts. For example, the concept of *counter-productivity* is not free from a certain productivist bias, or the comparison between the energy that goes into a vehicle and the “energy” of the human body implicitly makes of the body a thermodynamic machine. He also publicly renounced the use of cybernetic-friendly concepts, like input, output, feed-back or even “to cope.” He gave a historical sense to the word *system*: the expression the *age of*

² In Greek, *krisis* means crossroad, or decision. The adjective, critical, derives from it.

³ Or: *The Testament of Ivan Illich as told to David Cayley*, Toronto. House of Anansi Press, 2005, p. 78.

⁴ Ibid.

systems was increasingly used to define an epoch, our epoch, in which the concepts that he now avoided have become founding axioms of the social construction of reality.

In respect to his *krisis*, the first question that we must confront is: did the Illich of the 1970s really commit gross mistakes, or has a radical epistemic break occurred around 1980, a break that invalidated the critique of industrial society that Illich had elaborated in the previous decade? In other words, has Illich successively achieved the critique of two very different eras, the late period of tools, and the era of systems?

Thus, from 1980 on, Illich wrote books and essays on subjects that apparently bear little relation with his previous themes. His new themes are for instance body history, the history of perceptions, the “interface” between orality and literacy (to use Walter Ong’s terms⁵), proportionality, systemic requirements instead of personal needs, risks, and the history of scarcity. What does it have to do with the strong concepts of the previous decade, like counter-productivity, the synergy of autonomous and heteronomous modes of production or radical monopoly? Apparently nothing.

The Substitution of an Iatrogenic Body for the Perceived Body

At this point, I have to share an experience: I have revisited Illich’s early works after having read his last books and essays and the familiarity I gained with the “second Illich” radically changed my perception of the “first.” This talk is inspired by this experience, which I warmly recommend to everyone interested in Illich. For the sake of my argument, I’ll take *Medical Nemesis*. In the seventies, medicine is counter-productive. After 1980—personal *krisis* or epochal break?—medicine pushes a certain body under the patient’s skin. More precisely, the medical act now substitutes an iatrogenic body for the patient’s perceived body. Doing so, medicine destroys culture, since every culture is based on a shared perception of

⁵ See Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologization of the Word*, London: Routledge, 1982.

the body as the changing basis of the “I” in every historical epoch. This destruction goes far beyond the historic enclosure of the commons.

The Search for at Least One Precedent

I’ll now ask a question that might seem rhetorical but that, the more I think it, can be structuring: is there another author whose work can be divided into two parts, related in such a way that: each one can be read independently and treats apparently unrelated topics; one is better-known than the other; the reading of the less-known work changes the perception of the well-known work?

In 1759, Adam Smith published *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which is a relatively little-known work. In 1776, he published *The Wealth of Nations* that made of him the putative father of modern economics. For a long time, economists, who read the first book after having studied the second said “nothing to do with what interests us.” Nonetheless, a small number of them, who reread the second book after the first, erected Adam Smith’s problem into a respectable academic theme dubbed “das Adam Smith Problem.” Is there or is there not a line of continuity between the two books? That’s the “problem.”

My friend Jean-Pierre Dupuy states that “today, the prevailing opinion is that Smith’s thought is a coherent whole.”⁶ The effect of (re) visiting the first book after having acquired a familiarity with the second is that it projects a new light on “...the conditions of the constitution of economics into a science.”⁷ According to Dupuy, the light that *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* projects on *The Wealth of Nations* is that economic behavior in the modern sense is essentially mimetic or even envious. One does rarely pursue riches to consume it or even to use it, but for the envious gaze it will elicit in others: riches attract the others’

⁶ Jean-Pierre Dupuy, “De l’émancipation de l’économie. Retour sur la problème d’Adam Smith,” *Introduction aux sciences sociales. Logique des phénomènes collectifs*, Paris : Ellipses, X École Polytechnique, 1992, p. 148.

⁷ Op. cit., p. 149.

sympathy. The others' sympathetic—or envious—gaze is the reward for the ostentation of useless riches. Smith confirmed the status of economics as a science by systematically confusing subsistence and economics (e.g. the rules of the game for purchasing diamonds and for yielding water). The abolition of the distinction between economics and subsistence submits man's livelihood to the iron law of scarcity and to the bad weathers of the markets.

On the contrary, Illich's contributions to economic thinking has been to insist on the logical necessity of restoring the commons as a domain not submitted to economics, that is to the iron law of scarcity. His defense of the commons tends to reestablish a distinction that, before the XVIIIth century, was simply part of the art of government. More precisely, by analyzing critically the economics of services and professions, Illich allowed to reestablish a clear distinction between economics as a domain submitted to the law of scarcity and subsistence as an autonomous production of use values not submitted to it; the reason is that “beyond certain thresholds,” economics—or the “formal economy”—inevitably destroys a culture of subsistence (example: the industrial production of food threatens the existence of subsistence agriculture)⁸. Once again, this verifies Illich's capacity to build distinctions where a gray indifference reigns.

Before Smith's century, the economy had still something to do with the Greek verb from which it derives, *oikonomieô*, I administer my house, semantically close to *oikodomeô*, I prepare the ground for cultivation or for the edification of a house. Subsistence was a domain protected from cupidity, greed, envy. A domain in which a general rule prevailed, one fostering the protection of the weakest's subsistence, a domain where there were many *commons*. A 17th century witness, Samuel Pufendorf, describes the situation in the following terms:

⁸ Nonetheless, subsistence and non-industrial farmers are still the world's major producers of food.

...the necessity of the thing, or its exalted usefulness, are so far from always holding the first place, that we rather see men hold in lowest esteem the things with which human life cannot dispense. And this because nature, not without the singular providence of God, pours forth a bountiful supply of them. Hence an increase of value tends to be produced especially by scarcity; and this is made much of when things are brought from distant parts. Hence love of display and luxury have placed enormous prices on many things with which human life could very comfortably dispense, for instance pearls and jewels. But for articles in everyday use prices are raised especially when their scarcity is combined with necessity or want.⁹

The Conflation of Economy and Subsistence

God's providence pours forth a bountiful supply of the things with which human life cannot dispense and which are free, like water, or cheap, like bread. Expensive goods are generally useless, as are jewels or diamonds. When the economy was not a science, but part of the art of government, a strict distinction between subsistence goods—which are the goods with which man cannot dispense—and the trade of sumptuary goods deprived of subsistence value was strictly maintained. Smith, and all economists after him, abolished that distinction. Once the economy had been conflated with subsistence, it ceased definitively to be the good administration of a house. It ceased to deal with subsistence, this easy and, for Smith, “uninteresting question.” Modern economics is no longer submitted to the rule of satiety and to just proportion and becomes a chrematistics, a shameful activity, according to Aristotle. An activity ruled by the law of scarcity.

The traditional commons protected subsistence from cupidity, envy and all that can be qualified as destructive mimetic relation. To abolish the distinction between a domain obeying the rule of satiety and just proportion and another domain submitted to destructive mimetic behaviors is to leave the subsistence of common people at the mercy of the markets where mimetic relations reign without restraint. The laws that rule modern markets, the

⁹ Samuel Pufendorf, *The Two Books on the Duty of Man and Citizen according to the Natural Law*, Chapter XIV, “On Value,” Cambridge, 1682.

“laws” of economics are not the social equivalent of the laws of physics, but manifestations of mimetism, of which the first is the fundamental “law” of economics, scarcity, one of the main figures of mimetic behavior, according to Dupuy.

Reestablishing the Suppressed Distinction

Besides of being the author of a late work capable of modifying the perception of his early work—whilst the reverse is true for Smith—Illich has little in common with the moral philosopher and then economist from Glasgow. In order to see how he restored the distinction that Smith negated, one has to read the introduction of *Shadow Work*.¹⁰ Three sets of political limits had successively been proposed: 1. the production and consumption of material goods and energy must be limited; 2. one has to limit the production and consumption also of services. After 1980, Illich introduced the necessity of a third type of limits: 3. the limits that must be imposed to all what paralyzes the commons and causes subsistence to be conflated with economics.

The third type of limits is the decisive departure from Smith who, by submitting subsistence goods to the same law as sumptuary goods, gave a new virulence to the old war against subsistence. What Ivan Illich attempted is to put again in the foreground what Smith – and all economists after him – had repressed:

- water before diamonds;
- subsistence before economics;
- what is common (“mean”) before aristocratic modalities;
- oral epics before poetry;
- the felt *soma* before the iatrogenic body (or anatomic descriptions);

¹⁰ London: Marion Boyars, Open forum series, 1981.

- the history of stuff before the history of ideas;
- “*quod est in sensu*” before “*quod est in intellectu*”
- the percept before the concept;
- material culture before “high culture”;
- incarnation before anagogic elevation;
- the baby in the crib before the heavenly Emperor.

Little by little, I am revisiting the first part of Illich’s work and reinterpreting it along the insights of the second part.