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IVAN ILLICH

(1926-)

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To write a profile of an educator like Ivan Illich is not an easy task. Here, first of all, is a thinker set in a specific historical context—that of the 1960s—a period characterized by radical criticism of capitalist society and its institutions, among them the school.

Furthermore, the personality we are dealing with is a complex one. In those years it was said of Ivan Illich that he was an intelligent man who liked to surround himself with gifted people and did not suffer fools gladly. He could be the most cordial of men, but was also capable of the most devastating ridicule of those who questioned his ideas. He was an indefatigable worker and a multilingual, cosmopolitan man whose ideas, whether on the Church and its reform, culture and education, medicine or transport in modern societies ignited controversies that made him one of the outstanding figures of our time.

But those controversies were also triggered partly by Illich himself: by his personality, his style, his working methods and the radical nature of his ideas. For educators, in fact, Ivan Illich, once a priest, is the father of ´deschooled' education, the writer who condemns out of hand the school system and the schools, excoriating them, along with many other public institutions, for exercising anachronistic functions that fail to keep pace with change, serving only to maintain the *status quo* and protect the structure of the society that produced them.

Early life and vocation

Ivan Illich was born in Vienna in 1926 and attended a religious school from 1931 to 1941. After being expelled under the anti-Semitic laws because of his Jewish maternal ancestry, he completed his secondary studies at the University of Florence in Italy and then studied theology and philosophy at the Gregorian University in Rome, later obtaining his doctorate in history at the University of Salzburg.

Although earmarked by the Vatican for its diplomatic service, Illich opted for a pastoral ministry and was appointed assistant parish priest to a New York church with an Irish and Puerto Rican congregation. He worked there from 1951 to 1956, when he left to take up the post of Vice-Rector of the Catholic University of Ponce in Puerto Rico. His interest in furthering the spread of what he called 'intercultural sensibility' led him to found, soon after his appointment, the Centre for Intercultural Communication.

The centre, which was open only in the summer, at first only taught Spanish to American church and lay missionaries who were intending to return to work among the Puerto Ricans who had migrated in large numbers to cities in the United States. Although language teaching formed a large part of the institute's activities, Illich insisted that the essence of the programme lay in developing the ability to see things through the eyes of people of different cultures.

His relations with the University of Ponce came to an end in 1960 following a disagreement with the bishop of the diocese, who had forbidden Catholics in his jurisdiction to vote for a

candidate favouring birth control. Back in New York, he accepted a professorship at Fordham University. In 1961, as a means of furthering and strengthening intercultural relations, he founded the Centre for Intercultural Documentation (CIDOC) in the city of Cuernavaca, Mexico.

The purpose of CIDOC was to train American missionaries for work in Latin America. Over the years, however, it became a para-academic centre in which Ivan Illich's ideas on 'deschooled' education were put into practice.

From its foundation until the middle 1970s, CIDOC was a meeting-place for many American and Latin American intellectuals wishing to reflect on education and culture. Spanish-language courses and workshops on social and political themes were held there. The centre's library was highly regarded, and Illich himself directed seminars on institutional alternatives in the technological society. This was also the period of the famous, vigorously argued debates between Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich on education, schooling and the awakening of awareness, and of dialogues between Illich and other educational thinkers involved in the search for ways of transforming every moment of life into a learning experience, usually outside the school system.

This was a time when Illich began to be widely known. His notoreity began with his criticism of the Roman Catholic Church as an institution, which he described as a huge business training and employing religious professionals in order to perpetuate itself. He then extrapolated that concept to the institution of the school and formulated the criticism that was to lead him to work for a number of years on a proposal to 'deschool' society. His opinions on liberating the church from democracy in the future and the 'deschooling' of society soon made CIDOC a centre of ecclesiastical controversy, and it was for that reason that Illich dissociated it from the church in 1968 and left the priesthood in 1969.

During this time Illich developed what might be called his educational thinking. It was between the late 1960s and the middle 1970s that he published his principal works in the field. Later he altered his focus, shifting from analysis of the effects of schooling on society to that of the institutional problems of modern societies.

Towards the middle of the 1970s, although he still lived in Mexico, Illich addressed his writings to the international academic community and gradually distanced himself from Latin America. By the end of the decade he had left Mexico for good to settle in Europe.

Ivan Illich's work in education

CRITICISM OF THE SCHOOL, AND THE 'DESCHOOLING' OF SOCIETY

Ivan Illich's writings on education are made up of collections of articles and public speeches reproduced in various languages, as well as books, also distributed internationally, on subjects such as education, health and transport, and on ways in which future society might be organized.

His now famous paper 'School: the sacred cow' (CIDOC, 1968) is the first of a series of works in the field of education. In it Illich fiercely criticizes public schooling for its centralization, its internal bureaucracy, its rigidity and, above all, for the inequalities it harbours. Those ideas would later be further developed and published in his book *En América Latina ¿para qué sirve la escuela?* [Who does the school serve in Latin America?] (1970).

These two writings fuse into what is considered to be one of Illich's most important works, *Deschooling society*, published first in English (1970) and later in Spanish (1973). He presents the four central ideas that suffuse the whole of his work on education:

— 'universal education through schooling is not feasible. It would be more feasible if it were attempted by means of alternative institutions built on the style of present schools;

— neither new attitudes of teachers towards their pupils nor the proliferation of educational hardware or software [...], nor finally the attempt to expand the teachers' responsibility until it engulfs the pupils' lifetimes will deliver universal education;

— the current search for new educational funnels must be reversed into the search for their institutional inverse: educational webs which heighten the opportunity for learning, sharing and caring;
— the ethos, not just the institutions, of society ought to be 'deschooled'.

Illich's interest in the school and the processes of schooling, then, stemmed from his educational work in Puerto Rico, more specifically his work with American educators concerned about the direction they saw the public schools of their country taking. Illich himself acknowledges in the introduction to *Deschooling society*, that it is to Everett Reimer that he owes his interest in public education, adding that 'until we first met in Puerto Rico in 1958 I had never questioned the value of extending obligatory schooling to all people. Together we have come to realize that for most men the right to learn is curtailed by the obligation to attend school'.[2]

From then on schooling and education become diametrically opposed concepts for Illich. He begins by denouncing institutionalized education and the institution of the school as producers of merchandise with a specific exchange value in a society where those who already possess a certain cultural capital derive the most benefit.

On these general premises, Illich maintains that the prestige of the school as a supplier of good quality educational services for the population as a whole rests on a series of myths, which he describes as follows.

THE MYTH OF INSTITUTIONALIZED VALUES

This myth, according to Illich, is grounded in the belief that the process of schooling produces something of value. That belief generates a demand. It is assumed that the school produces learning. The existence of schools produces the demand for schooling. Thus the school suggests that valuable learning is the result of attendance, that the value of learning increases with the amount of this attendance, and that this value can be measured and documented by grades and certificates. Illich takes the opposite view: that learning is the human activity that least needs manipulation by others; that most learning is the result not of instruction but of participation by learners in meaningful settings. School, however, makes them identify their personal, cognitive growth with elaborate planning and manipulation.

THE MYTH OF MEASUREMENT OF VALUES

According to Illich, the institutionalized values school instils are quantified ones. For him personal growth cannot be measured by the yardstick of schooling but, once people have the idea schooled into them that values can be produced and measured, they tend to accept all kinds of rankings.

> People who submit to the standard of others for the measure of their own personal growth soon apply the same standard to themselves. They no longer have to be put in their place but put themselves into their assigned slots, squeeze themselves into the niche which they have been taught to seek, and in the very process, put their fellows into their places, too, until everybody and everything fits.[3]

THE MYTH OF PACKAGING VALUES

The school sells the curriculum, says Illich, and the result of the curriculum production process looks like any other modern staple product. The distributor/teacher delivers the finished product to the consumer/pupil, whose reactions are carefully studied and charted to provide research data for the preparation of the next model, which may be 'ungraded', 'student-designed', 'visually-aided', or 'issue-centred'.

THE MYTH OF SELF-PERPETUATING PROGRESS

Illich talks not only about consumption but about production and growth. He links these with the race for degrees, diplomas and certificates, since the greater one's share of educational qualifications the greater one's chances of a good job. For Illich the working of consumer societies is founded to a great extent on this myth, and its perpetuation is an important part of the game of permanent regimentation. To smash it, says Illich, 'would endanger the survival not only of the economic order built on the co-production of goods and demands, but equally of the political order built on the nation-State into which students are delivered by the school.'[5] Consumers/pupils are taught to adjust their desires to marketable values, even though this cycle of eternal progress can never lead to maturity.

In conclusion Illich points out that the school is not the only modern institution whose main purpose is to shape people's view of reality. Other factors contribute to this, factors related to social origins and family surroundings, the media and informal socialization networks. These, amongst others, are key elements in moulding behaviour and values. But he considers that it is the school that is most deeply and systematically enslaving. It alone is entrusted with the task of forming critical judgement, a task that, paradoxically, it tries to carry out by ensuring that learning, whether about oneself, about others or about nature, follows a predetermined pattern.

Illich defends these opinions in his polemical and provocative style, affirming that, in his judgement, 'school impinges so intimately upon us that no one can hope to be freed from it by any external means'.[6] And he adds:

> Schooling—the production of knowledge, the marketing of knowledge, which is what the school amounts to—draws society into the trap of thinking that knowledge is hygienic, pure, respectable, deodorized, produced by human heads and amassed in a stock. I see no difference between rich and poor countries in the development of these attitudes to knowledge. There is a difference of degree, of course; but I find it much more interesting to analyse the hidden impact of the school structure on a society; and I see that this impact is equal or, to be more precise, tends to be equal. It doesn't matter what the overt structure of the curriculum is, whether the school is public, whether it exists in a State that has the monopoly of public schools, or in a State where private schools are tolerated or even encouraged. It is the same in rich as in poor countries, and might be described as follows: if this ritual that I consider schooling to be is defined by a society as education [...] then the members of that society, by making schooling compulsory, are schooled to believe that the self-taught individual is to be discriminated against; that learning and the growth of cognitive capacity, require a process of consumption of services presented in an industrial, a planned, a professional form;[...] that learning is a thing rather than an activity. A thing that can be amassed and measured, the possession of which is a measure of the productivity of the individual within the society. That is, of his social value [...][7]

Out of this analysis grew the strategies Ivan Illich proposes for 'deschooling' education and teaching. He himself tested these strategies on young people and adults taking part in the workshops and activities of CIDOC in Cuernavaca. We shall return to them later.

'CONVIVIALITY'

The works that followed *Deschooling society* go beyond education to focus more broadly on the reorganization of society and work, in accordance with human needs. This is the message of *Tools for conviviality* (1973), *Energy and equity* (1974) and *Medical nemesis: the expropriation of health* (1982).

In the last two works Illich asserts that, just as the school 'de-educates', institutionalized medicine has become a serious health problem. He also uses the example of transport to illustrate his view of the way continuing progress and increasing comfort, in the industrialized countries, lead to waste and the inability to make proper use of any energy source. His thinking on these subjects is

to be found in *Medical nemesis* and *Energy and equity*. In these works, too, Illich leaves education and the school to take up the analysis of political and institutional problems that affect modern societies, with their high degree of technology and stratification, problems inescapable for countries that pursue their development on the pattern of today's industrialized countries.

In *Tools for conviviality* Illich proposes a rival strategy calling for limits to the growth of industrialized societies and suggests a new kind of organization for them, to be achieved through, among other means, a new concept of work and the 'deprofessionalization' of social relations, not excluding education and the school.

'Convivial' institutions, as Illich defines them, are characterized by their vocation of service to society, by spontaneous use of and voluntary participation in them by all members of society. Illich therefore attributes the word 'convivial' to a society in which 'modern technologies serve politically interrelated individuals rather than managers'. And he adds 'a "convivial" society is one in which people control the tools'.[8]

What is fundamental to a 'convivial' society is not the total absence of those institutions which Illich calls manipulative, or of addiction to specific goods and services. What he proposes is a balance between institutions that create the specific demands they are specialized to satisfy and those that foster self-realization.

A 'convivial' society, Illich insists, 'does not exclude all schools. It does exclude a school system which has been perverted into a compulsory tool, denying privileges to the drop-out. I am using the school as an example of a phenomenon to be found elsewhere in the industrial world [...]this claim is analogous to my observation on the two types of institutionalization of society'.[9] And he adds:

> In every society there are two ways of achieving specific ends, such as locomotion, communication among people, health, learning. One I call autonomous, the other heteronomous. In the autonomous mode I move myself. In the heteronomous mode I am strapped into a seat and carried. In the autonomous mode I heal myself, and you help me in my paralysis, and I help you in your childbearing [...]In every society and in every sector, the efficiency with which the goal of the sector is achieved depends on an interaction between the autonomous and the heteronomous modes.[10]

It is important to emphasize that Ivan Illich does not attack any specific political system or regime but rather the entire industrial mode of production and its consequences for humankind. His central thesis in this regard is that 'the means of production have technical characteristics that make them impossible to control by a political process. Only a society that accepts the need to agree on a ceiling for certain technical dimensions of its means of production enjoys political alternatives'.[11] He calls the attention of developing countries to these dimensions and, in so doing, he throws down challenges to education.

All these ideas find expression in Illich's thesis of 'conviviality', the main thrust of which is to call the attention of developing countries to the advantages and drawbacks of adopting the same style of development as the industrialized countries. At the time that he was putting forward these ideas the majority of these countries, especially in Latin America, had not reached the same stage of development as the industrialized countries and, in Illich's view, still had time to reverse the trend, to redefine their goals and priorities and select development styles that were more equitable, participatory and conducive to the preservation of natural balance and 'convivial' relations. 'Reconstruction for poor countries means adopting a set of negative criteria within which their tools are kept, in order to advance directly into a post-industrial era of conviviality. The limits to choose are of the same order as those which hyper-industrialized countries will have to adopt for the sake of survival [...]Conviviality, which will be immediately accessible to the "underdeveloped", will have to be bought by the "developed" at an exorbitant price'.[13]

These words of Illich's, written in the mid-1970s, are very similar to those being used now to show that, less than ten years from the end of the century, the countries of North and South, of

East and West, are at last realizing that they form a universal whole and that they have more in common than they thought. Environmental problems and ecological imbalances impinge equally on all; a declining standard of living does not distinguish between developed countries and those still in search of sustainable development. All are equally concerned for the quality and effectiveness of learning inside or outside the school system, and no one can ignore that school and education are far from having adapted themselves to the pace of scientific and technological change or to the most immediate needs of those who look to them for their self-realization in the world of today. It is a fact that the search for solutions to these problems is no longer solely in the hands of developed countries, and here Illich's opinions contain a great deal of truth.

Developing countries now not only form part of world problems but are also bound up with the solutions to those problems. The 'convivial' society may not be the answer. But it must be recognized that Illich dealt with these themes almost three decades ago. Whether because of the ideological context in which the ideas were born and developed, whether because of a lack of theoretical foundation to sustain them, or because of Illich's own personality, the themes of 'deschooling' society and building a 'convivial' society did not receive the attention they deserved, and there was no further development of a line of thinking that might have borne better fruit.

Alternatives

If, decades later, we separate Illich's thought from its emotional context, it is interesting to realize how thought-provoking some of his suggestions and proposals are. The themes seen by Illich in terms of changed perspectives, changed motivation and changes in what he calls the tools, the structure and the material means of production are recurrent themes today in the debate on progress in science and technology, the impact of computers on daily life, and the privatization of public services, including health, education and transport.

Let us return to the question of strategies and the historical context in which Illich developed them. He maintained that:

> without prejudice to discussion of good motivations and correct viewpoints, the debate that must be encouraged at this moment in history is the communal and political analysis of the materials of production. For me society's alternative is to be found in the conscious limitation of technology to those uses that are truly efficient. I mean the limitation of vehicle speeds to levels at which they do not create more distance than they eliminate. The limitation of medical intervention to those procedures that [...] do not damage health more than they improve it. The limitation of the tools of communication to sizes at which they do not produce, by definition, more noise than signal, a signal that is usable for the act of life that I call understanding. I do not see, therefore, why the institution of school for all, which is an institution that became necessary about 80 years ago, should continue to exist and to trouble us.[13]

What troubles Illich in this case, as it does other educators of the period, is not educational practice in itself but the impact of schooling on society, and how a type of education that 'asks itself in what conditions people's curiosity might flourish'[14] might be achieved.

His reply to this question is that a good education system should have three purposes. To provide all who want to learn with access to available resources at any time in their lives; to make it possible for all who want to share what they know to find those who want to learn it from them; and to furnish all who want to present a debatable issue to the public with the opportunity to make their arguments known.

He thinks that no more than four, and possibly three, webs or networks of exchange might contain all the necessary resources for effective learning.

The first he calls 'reference services to educational objects'. The purpose of these is to facilitate access to things used for formal learning. Some of the examples he gives are libraries, laboratories and display places. Places such as museums and theatres, together with things that may

be in daily use in factories, airports or public places but are made available to would-be students, whether as apprentices-at their place of work-or as people taking advantage of their leisure time.

The second he calls 'skill exchanges', which allow people to list their skills and abilities, the conditions under which they are willing to serve as models for others who want to learn these skills, and how they can be reached for this purpose.

The third network is what Illich calls 'peer-matching', a network that permits persons to describe the learning activity in which they wish to engage, in the hope of finding a partner for their inquiry.

Finally, Illich proposes a fourth network, which he calls 'reference services to educators-at-large' consisting of a directory giving addresses and self-descriptions of professionals, para-professionals and freelancers, along with the conditions of access to their services. Polling or consulting their former clients could choose such educators.

Today this educational proposal, if it has not found its way into the school system, has come into effect, under a variety of labels, in the non-formal education of young people and adults, in lifelong education and in other fields that admit 'deschooled' education. And, in practice, we hear more and more often of the existence of networks composed of people who want to share generally useful knowledge, forge links to exchange experiences and create and strengthen the capacity for autonomous development—to innovate and to learn from accumulated experience.

A glance around us will show that there exist today innumerable data banks, that more and more research and information exchange networks are being set up, and that increasingly the major problems of humankind are being tackled by teams of people bringing together multiple skills.
Paradoxically, only the school seems to be keeping up at an undiminished pace the ritual and routine that were denounced by Illich and other educators of his generation. To change it will require a real revolution, sparked off perhaps by the changes taking place in society as a whole in the spheres of economics, agriculture, energy, data processing, health, standards of living and conditions of work. Here we must include overpopulation, unemployment, poverty and the lessons that should be learned from them in the struggle to achieve a harmonious style of development in which human survival will depend on the creativity, freedom and enthusiasm that each and every human being can bring to the task.

Closing remarks

Much of this is to be found in Illich's work and writings. His mistake, perhaps, was to condemn the school out of hand. The radical nature of his denunciation prevented him from constructing a realistic strategy for those educators and researchers who might have associated themselves with his protest. In addition, Illich's writings were founded essentially on intuitions, without any appreciable reference to the results of socio-educational or learning research. His criticism evolves in a theoretical vacuum, which may explain the limited acceptance his educational theories and proposals find today.

Indeed, Illich is widely accused of being a Utopian thinker and is further criticized for his early withdrawal from the wider educational debate. A deeper involvement and the development of viable strategies for putting his ideas into practice, plus a solid theoretical foundation to sustain them, might have led him along different paths.

Notwithstanding all this, Ivan Illich must be recognized an educational thinkers who helped to give life to the educational debate of the 1970s. He laid the groundwork for the conception of a school more attentive to the needs of its environment, to the realities of its pupils' lives and to the efficient acquisition of socially relevant knowledge. Even if the radical nature of his criticisms made it impossible to put them into practice, many of his ideas have universal validity, both for the school system and for other institutions of public utility. And it can never be denied that these ideas influenced a considerable number of educators and extended the movement for 'deschooling'

education beyond the historical context in which it was generated, to be manifested in policies and programmes aimed at mitigating the endemic crisis of formal and non-formal education as a whole.

Notes

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2. I. Illich, *Deschooling society*, p. vii, London, Calder & Boyers, 1971.
3. Ibid., p. 40.
4. Ibid., p. 49.
5. 'Conversando con I. Illich', in: *Cuadernos de pedagogía* (Barcelona), vol. 1, July-August 1975, p. 16–22. (Dossier Freire/Illich)
5. Ibid., p. 18.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., p. 19–20.
8. Ibid.
9. I. Illich, *Tools for conviviality*, p. 56, New York, NY., Harper & Row, 1973.
10. 'Dossier Freire/Illich', in *Cuadernos de pedagogía*, op. cit.,19, 17.
11. Ibid., p. 60–61.
12. Quoted in R.D. de Oliveira et al., 'Pedagogía de los oprimidos. Opresión de la pedagogía' [Education of the oppressed. oppression of education], in *Cuadernos de pedagogía*, op. cit., p. 4–15.

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