

# The nonconformist (IVAN ILLICH: A TRIBUTE)

By Thierry Paquot (2003)

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IVAN ILLICH did not wake up after his siesta on December 2. This time he was really dead - I write that because, for some years, every time I mentioned his name, people would ask me when he died. A new French edition of his complete works will soon be published (1), enabling some to revisit his work and others to discover it for the first time. Like the man himself, the work is challenging, abundant, disturbing and hard to classify. He was anything but a conformist. He was tall and slim, with a friendly demeanour, and fine profile spoiled by a large nose.

After the usual exchange of banalities the speed of his discourse would pick up, reflecting the alacrity of his thought and intelligence. Once he started talking about an 18th century German doctor's theory of humours, backtracked to Aristotle, then drew a parallel with the encyclopaedist Diderot and the chemist Lavoisier. He mentioned the physiologist Claude Bernard in passing, discussed the psychoanalysts Michael and Enid Balint, then returned to the German doctor. He expressed his doubts about medical consultations, diagnosis and the risk of being "dispossessed" by doctors. He talked about the contemporary refusal to admit the reality of pain and described modern hospitals in detail, overturning some of his own earlier conclusions published in *Medical Nemesis*.

Another time he set off to demonstrate that silence could be a means of protest, like non-violence. He outlined the ideas developed by the philosopher Max Picard and compared them with those of Emmanuel Levinas. He mentioned a discussion with the sociologist and mystic Michel de Certeau, on speaking and on keeping silent. Then he jumped to the Church fathers and the life of hermits, and mentioned silent happenings in which he took part. He referred to the spoken word in the context of a society that had been governed by writing, and was now governed by pictures, and concluded by talking about the 12th century, his favourite period.

Both of these conversations, and accounts of others, confirm the impressive scope of his knowledge, helped by his command of some 10 languages and his unbounded curiosity.

Illich was born in Vienna. His father was a Catholic from Dalmatia, his mother a German Jew. He had several mother tongues: French, Italian and German. At the age of eight he started learning Serbo-Croat to be able to talk to his grandparents, and subsequently studied Greek and Latin (which contributed to his etymological approach to words and concepts), Spanish, Portuguese and Hindi. He read crystallography at Florence, philosophy and theology in Rome, and history in Salzburg. He was ordained as a priest and, in 1951, left for New York where he asked for a Porto Rican parish.

In 1956, at 30, he became the deputy rector of the Catholic university of Porto Rico. He became critical of the education system and the reactionary attitudes of the clergy, and set up alternative seminars and working groups. Three years later he crossed the whole of Latin America on foot and by bus, and he also began to oppose the North American development model. He settled in Cuernavaca, Mexico, and opened the International Cultural Documentation Centre (Cidoc), which at first attracted US volunteers, on John Kennedy's Alliance for Progress programme, who came to study Spanish language and culture. But Cidoc chiefly established a reputation for critical analysis of capitalist society by intellectuals of all nationalities, under Illich's guidance.

Cidoc operated from 1966 to 1976. In 1967 Illich severed his links with the Roman Catholic church. The church summoned him after a report by the CIA, but it was mostly concerned about the readership of pieces on the church (2). Illich said that Cidoc was under pressure and that he had even been physically attacked, but he never gave details. Cidoc became a mandatory meeting place for members of the radical left and students of the third world. It was a place for serious work and festive encounters, both influenced by Christianity. Although Illich was no longer a priest, he remained convinced that most of the key ideas that shaped the contemporary world were Christian in origin (3).

Two books, *Deschooling Society* and *Tools For Conviviality*, made Illich famous and by the time he was 50 his ideas were being discussed all over the world. These works tried to prove that beyond a certain threshold institutions and social mechanisms, such as churches, schools, hospitals and transport systems, become counter-productive. The more a technical system progresses, the less control we have over it, thus reducing our self-sufficiency. We have become more and more dependent on systems we cannot master, such as nuclear power, motorways, chemotherapy, or genetically modified organisms.

Beneath the observations that his followers were quick to oversimplify - "hospitals make people sick", "cars jam the traffic" - was a remarkable criticism of progress and the way that progress was justified as the satisfaction of "needs" (4). Illich however rejected the route taken by the members of the Club of Rome, which in 1972 had called on world leaders to halt growth to postpone the moment when the world would run out of raw materials, and to reduce waste of energy reserves. He denounced both thoughtless deployment of technology and the political economics of development. His first two books should be read together, as they are part of a single project, which was the complete liberation of each individual's unique qualities, regardless of culture, revenue or any role in the production system.

He believed that such liberation depended on controlling the body and its desires, regardless of the available technology. He used to tell the story of a student to whom he once offered a glass of cider. She replied: "No thanks, I have already met my sugar requirements for the day." This, he believed, was an example of how standardisation and calorie-counting alienated people from their real needs. Having a drink while talking has nothing to do with nutrition, but is part of a ritual - needs are always influenced by culture and context. Illich spent several years studying the invention of standardised needs. In the process he had to invent a new kind of genealogy to cover life, people, gender and health.

This led him to explore the history of the West. He began to ask at what point, under what circumstances and with what results, did work become the focus of people and society? *Shadow Work* and *Vernacular Values* filled the gaps in his earlier essays. They underline the importance of language to the roots of each person, they show how an increasing emphasis on sexuality in society worsens gender discrimination, and demonstrate how misguided we are to take homo economicus as a model of behaviour. These books irritated Third World activists, who felt that the idea of shadow work did not recognise the value of the poor or their dependence on the informal employment sector. Feminists rejected Illich's gender distinctions, and called for legal and economic equality for men and women. His subsequent work on the spoken and written word, and on images, went unnoticed.

In the 1970s France's alternative left idolised Illich. But when it came to power in 1981 with the election of Francois Mitterand to the presidency, Illich seemed too pessimistic. Third World activists had to cope with the end of the cold war, a globalising economy and the spread of information and communications technology. They could not find answers to their questions in Illich's work. Ecologists disliked his criticism of the principle of responsibility, which had been introduced by Hans Jonas. Nor did they agree with his criticism of technology, inspired by Jacques Ellul, Lewis Mumford and others.

In other countries networks set up by Illich continue to disseminate his research and explore what he had pioneered. There is no doubt about his influence, however hard it may be to evaluate, as can be seen from the popularity of his ideas and the references to his work in bibliographies. From the 1976 UN Habitat conference in Vancouver to the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, from neighbourhood committees voting on participatory budgets to pressure groups against the neoliberal global market (5), Illich's ideas are alive and kicking very hard.

Translated by Harry Forster

(1) Fayard, Paris, in 2003.

(2) Ivan D Illich, *Celebration of awareness; a call for institutional revolution*, Doubleday, New York, 1970.

(3) Ivan Illich in conversation, David Cayley, Anansi, Concord, Ontario, 1992.

(4) See Ivan Illich, "Needs", *The Development Dictionary*, ed Wolfgang Sachs, Zed Books, London, 1992.

(5) Two sites are good starting points for exploring Illich's work: [www.ivanillich.org/ideas.htm](http://www.ivanillich.org/ideas.htm) and [www.preservenet.com/theory/Illich.html](http://www.preservenet.com/theory/Illich.html)