

Ivan Illich – Personal Recollections

By Sam Sullivan

Ivan Illich sought me out, sat down beside me and started to inquire about my life. I was at a gathering at the Oakland home of Mayor Jerry Brown, former Governor of California, for three days. Ivan had a huge cancerous tumor on his face for which he had refused treatment. He had decided to embrace his cancer and explore its meaning. Doctors had recommended a procedure; Ivan had outlived the average life of those who had undergone it.

In the middle of our conversation Ivan would lean forward with his head on the table and shake a bit. I was very concerned and asked what was happening. He replied that he was giggling and that his condition often led him to do that. I was very intimidated by this man who had had such a profound impact on so many powerful intellectuals. I blurted out something about Ludwig Klages, a philosopher that I knew had influenced him. He seemed genuinely pleased and surprised that I knew about this obscure thinker. For the next three days I shadowed him, amazed at how familiar I could be with this legend.

Ivan Illich was a thinker's thinker. He was a Roman Catholic priest who studied medieval thinkers. Born into a wealthy household with ancestors as diverse as the peoples in his Austro-Hungarian Empire, he was drawn to poor and minority people. He became a priest to Puerto Ricans in New York. When the Pope decided to send North American clergy and laypeople to South America to teach them to be "civilized", Ivan was offended. He set up a language school in Cuernavaca, Mexico, ostensibly to teach them Spanish to initiate their journeys, but with the subversive goal of undermining the whole enterprise. He chose peasants to teach the newcomers, believing that they should instead teach the North Americans to be human. Such behaviour made him enemies in the Church. One of these was the Pope, who had originally been a friend of Ivan's in seminary school. Ivan was summoned to Rome and he agreed to pull back from his advocacy work within the church.

Illich took his critique of the Church and used its structure to analyze many aspects of modern society, to great effect. He felt that the Church had gone wrong when it institutionalized things he believed could never be institutionalized – like love and caring. Once an institution was created, it became populated by professionals who exacerbated the original problem by convincing others that only professionals could effectively do what their institution was committed to. Thus Church institutions that were created to promote love and caring perversely created the opposite, by disempowering individuals from their responsibilities. Illich saw the Catholic Church as one of the founding bureaucracies of the modern Western world, and the model for many of our other institutions.

His writings shook the foundations of the powerful institutions and assumptions of modern society and were welcomed enthusiastically by the growing counterculture movement. In the late 1950s he wrote *Energy and Transformation*, which critiqued our addiction to the car and society's emphasis on speed. Illich was the first thinker to challenge the assumption that the automobile's dominance of our communities would

make us better off. His writing was dense and opaque, but his ideas were electrifying and spawned generations of critics of the automobile.

His article "Medical Nemesis" argued that our health institutions were actually making people sicker. The great breakthroughs for the health of communities, he argued, were such things as washing with water and soap and eating a proper diet. Health institutions were very low on predictors of health in a society – far lower than rates of education, average income and level of employment – and many medical problems were in fact caused by doctors. Illich called these "iatrogenic illnesses".

Illich then trained his sights on the institution of education, on which he delivered withering assaults. His book *Deschooling Society* essentially said that schools make people dumber. This book spawned the home school movement and gave it legitimacy. His social critiques then turned to the justice system and corrections institutions that turned people into criminals. In his book *Tools for Conviviality*, he criticized modern society's tendency to embrace technology regardless of its impact on communities and human relations. Technology, he said, should be evaluated critically for its impact on the health of individuals and their communities.

Illich was a contrarian and an iconoclast, and he enjoyed the chaos he inspired among the smug and self-assured ruling classes of modern society. He took seriously his religious duties of comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable. He was also easily caricatured, and he was so rigorous in applying his critique to life that these caricatures were often valid. His devotion to the bicycle and his refusal of treatments for his cancer could be seen as examples of this, but to focus on them would be to miss the essence of his thought. The reality is that Illich was one of the few who attacked the very foundations of modern society in an intellectually rigorous and morally defensible way. And although some of the details of his arguments have been disproved, the essence is as powerful as ever.

When Ivan Illich was born the doctors believed he had a mental disability and should not be put in school. So from a very young age he engaged in self-study. He also spoke the many languages of his different caregivers, to the extent that he never was able to point to one mother tongue. In both his conversation and his writing he would switch seamlessly from one language to another. I was with him one evening when a number of his intellectual devotees arrived from various parts of the world. They would be speaking animatedly when someone would quote a philosopher in German. The conversation would then switch entirely to German. When someone quoted someone else in French, the conversation would continue in French, and then move effortlessly to Spanish. Well into the conversation Ivan realized I was not always following when he directed a question at me in another language. Because he knew I spoke some Chinese, and he had once tried (and failed) to master that language, he assured me that the next we met we would continue in Chinese!

While sitting at the dinner table Ivan asked me if I had pain. The fact that I was a quadriplegic in a wheelchair seemed to be what drew him to me in the first place. I replied that I had some pain and that I was often uncomfortable but that it was all manageable. I asked him how he managed his pain. He replied that he smoked opium. I was taken aback but probed into whether he found that getting stoned was a good way

to deal with the pain. He said he didn't get stoned –he only smoked enough to give him a certain distance from the pain. A traditional Muslim doctor from Pakistan, the “hakim of the hakims,” had prescribed it to him. His pain was as intense as ever but the opium gave him the sense that he was an observer as well as a participant in the experience of pain.

Ivan asked if I would like to come to his room the next morning to smoke opium with him. I smiled and said I would be happy to visit with him, secretly fretting about how I, a visiting city councillor from another country, could find myself in the Mayor's home smoking opium, a highly illegal drug! The ludicrousness of the drug war – yet another focus of Ivan Illich's wrath – revealed once again the truth of his ideas. Here was one of the great public intellectuals of our time, whose actions, which had a completely defensible intellectual foundation, could land him in jail as a common criminal according to the institutional thinking to which he was so opposed. The next morning I watched him cut his opium and smoke it. He shared many personal insights and I spent the morning keenly aware of how privileged I was to be in his presence in this informal way. Occasionally he would go to another part of the room and contort his body into unbelievable yoga positions.

Toward the end of the three days I asked some of his devotees if I could ask him for a photo together. Most thought this was a bad idea. One said, “You have seduced the seducer. He loves you and I wouldn't push that relationship any further.” Another said that perhaps his feelings about technology might be the reason he has rarely been photographed. I was disappointed and it probably showed. As we were saying goodbye, Ivan insisted I tell him what was on my mind. After a moment's hesitation I blurted out, “Ivan, I really wanted to ask you if it would be too much...or maybe I shouldn't ask...or – really, Ivan, what I really want is, could we have a picture together?”

His eyes brightened and he said, “Of course!” But he wanted a good backdrop. We went and found the only living plant in Jerry Brown's home and sat in front of it. He seemed to genuinely enjoy the process of the photo. He then went off to pack, climbing the stairs to his room. When I realized I still had one more picture left I asked that the photographer stand way back to get a picture of the large room. Just as he was about to take the photo I saw Ivan's head poke around the corner. He said, “No, wait.” He ran down the stairs, bounded up to me and took his place beside me for one last picture. As he was about to leave I told him about my struggle to ask him for the photo and my surprise that he would agree to it. I asked him what was his reason for agreeing. He replied, “Because it would give you such pleasure.”

Ivan died a couple of years ago, leaving a great void in the lives of his many devotees and a world that was more conscious of itself and better as a result. He was the genesis of so many schools of thought which have developed lives of their own. They have often gone in interesting new directions – but their origins can be found in this enigmatic priest from Eastern Europe.

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