

In Memoriam Ivan Illich: Critic of Professionalized Design

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Drawing done by Gary Palmatier for the cover
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*Eine fremde Verlorenheit war
gestalthaft zugegen....*

— Celan, *Die Niemandrose* (1963)

Ivan Illich, who inspired a critical appreciation of design and its limits, died his own death quietly at the home of friends in Bremen, Germany, on December 2, 2002. He was 76 years old, and had suffered for more than a decade with what appeared to be a mandibular tumor that he chose to treat as a difficult friend rather than an enemy. He was buried three days later on the outskirts of a city that had a tradition of independent hospitality for those who might even be its strongest critics. For the last ten years, Illich had lectured regularly at the Universität Bremen on such topics as friendship, *askesis*, and the history of the senses, in order to question “modern certainties.” He had been preparing a lecture on *misterium iniquitatis*, the mystery of evil, when he became tired, lay down for a nap, and did not awake again to this world. After being allowed to remain for three days simply where he had found rest, kept company by a single candle, a bouquet of flowers, and friends, he was buried in the Oberneuländer cemetery.

The Early Illich

Illich was born in Vienna in 1926, grew up in Italy, moved to the United States in the 1950s, founded the Centro Intercultural de Documentación (CIDOC) in Mexico (1966–1976), and since the 1980s served as a visiting scholar at multiple universities. He remains best known for three widely influential books from the 1970s: *Deschooling Society*, *Tools for Conviviality*, and *Medical Nemesis*.¹ In each case, Illich identified what he termed the phenomenon of “counterproductivity”: that is, the pursuit of a technique beyond its inherent limits.

In the discovery of proper limits, Illich had been influenced by studies of organic morphology and natural design such as D’Arcy Wentworth Thompson’s *On Growth and Form*,² J.B.S. Haldane’s “On Being the Right Size,”³ and especially Leopold Kohr’s *The Breakdown of Nations*.⁴ Indeed, Illich liked to tell of meeting Kohr quite by accident on a park bench in Puerto Rico, when both were there during the late 1950s.

- 1 Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971); Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973); Ivan Illich, *Medical Nemesis* (New York: Pantheon, 1976).
- 2 D’Arcy Wentworth Thompson’s *On Growth and Form*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1917).
- 3 J.B.S. Haldane, “On Being the Right Size” in *Possible Worlds and Other Essays* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1927), 18–26.
- 4 Leopold Kohr, *The Breakdown of Nations* (New York: Rinehart, 1957).

Kohr, a teacher of E.F. Schumacher⁵ became a mentor to Illich as well, helping him to appreciate the dis-economies of scale and to understand the manifold failures of attempts at unlimited expansions across a variety of sectors. The system of public schooling, designed originally to advance learning, had become an impediment to real education. Advanced technological tools of transportation and communication were at odds with autonomous human development and the culture of friendship, in the name of which they were commonly invented and continued to be promoted. High-tech health care was making people sick. Iatrogenic illnesses, that is, illnesses caused by physicians—as when patients have negative reactions to drugs, are harmed by diagnostic x-ray treatments, or are otherwise mistreated and misdiagnosed—had, he argued, become an epidemic of counterproductivity. Perhaps the most detailed analysis of counterproductivity is that found in *Energy and Equity*⁶—especially as extended in *La Trahison de l'opulence* by Jean Robert and Jean-Pierre Dupuy⁷—which argues that increased use of cars actually deprives one of auto(self)-mobility.

The correct response, for Illich, was to learn to practice a more disciplined and limited use of technology, and to invent alternative, especially low-scale, technologies. To this end, Illich continuously searched for what he called an *askesis* appropriate to the contemporary techno-lifeworld. Often he refused to wear glasses or to speak using a microphone. During one period, he practiced the discipline of not word-processing any text that he had not first composed with pen and paper. More publicly, Illich became a promotional theorist of alternative technology, as was reflected in Valentina Borremans's "Guide to Convivial Tools."⁸ Illich even limed to think that he had inadvertently contributed the *Whole Earth Catalog* motto, "Access to Tools."

In many instances, however, the practice of such a fundamentally ethical imperative was made more difficult than need be by what Illich termed "radical monopolies." Although no car manufacturer has a monopoly on the automobile market, cars themselves have a fundamental monopoly on roads such that they crowd out pedestrians and bicycles.

A Second Illich

In the late 1970s, Illich's thinking took a new turn. His essay *Toward a History of Needs*⁹—a volume which reprints "Energy and Equity"—points toward a new project in historical archeology that takes its first, full-bodied shape in *Gender*.¹⁰ Originally titled "Vernacular Gender," this book was among the first attempts to thematize the distinction between biological sex and its culturally constructed extensions in gender. The book provocatively attempted to recollect those social experiences of female/male complementary obscured by modern economic regimes. *H2O and the Waters of Forgetfulness*¹¹ explores the possibility of a history of "stuff," thus picking up

5 E.F. Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973).

6 Ivan Illich, *Energy and Equity* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).

7 Jean Robert and Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *La trahison de l'opulence* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1976).

8 Valentina Borremans, "Guide to Convivial Tools," *Library Journal, Special Report* No.13 (New York: Bowker, 1979).

9 Ivan Illich, *Toward a History of Needs* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

10 Ivan Illich, *Gender* (New York: Pantheon, 1982).

11 Ivan Illich, *H2O and the Waters of Forgetfulness* (Dallas, TX: Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, 1985).

on a phenomenology pioneered by Gaston Bachelard.¹² *ABC: The Alphabetization of the Popular Mind*¹³—building on the work of such scholars as Milman Parry, Albert Lord, and Eric Havelock¹⁴—carries historical archeology forward into the area of literacy, as does *In the Vineyard of the Text*.¹⁵ Both explore how the techniques of reading transform humans' experience of themselves and each other, thus inviting contemporary consumers of automobiles and computers to consider that they might not be wholly unaffected users of neutral technologies.

Modern technology, for Illich, emerges from and then reinforces a distinctive ethos, the recognition of which is best appreciated by investigations into the moral environments of previous techniques. In this approach, there is some similarity to the attitude of Martin Heidegger, who defended his studies of Plato with the argument that what those who disparage as a "retreat into history" may actually be used to cultivate a critical assessment of the contemporary world, which in turn enables us "to leap out beyond our own present."¹⁶ But unlike Heidegger, whose philosophical history justified a megalomaniac vision of himself as the vehicle for a new epochal "self-assertion" of that institution known as the German university, Illich's history promotes the moderation and delimitation of virtually all practices, but especially institutional ones. And again, unlike Heidegger, who seeks to understand the past better than it understood itself, Illich tries from the perspective of the past to re-understand the present. As he writes in the introduction to *In the Mirror of the Past*:

I plead for a historical perspective on precisely those assumptions that are accepted as verities or "practical certainties" as long as their sociogenesis remains unexamined.... [N]ot infrequently I look at the present as if I had to report on it to the authors of the old texts I try to understand. [In each essay, I want] to suggest that only in the mirror of the past does it become possible to recognize the radical otherness of our twentieth-century mental topology, and to become aware of its generative axioms that usually remain below the horizon of contemporary attention.¹⁷

At his death, another major collection of materials carrying forward this trajectory awaits publication.

Toward an Archeology of Design

In the mid-1990s, while Illich was a visiting professor at Pennsylvania State University, he made provisional forays as well into the historical archeology of design. As a collaborator during this period, I pushed for developing such a study in ways that would explicitly reconnect with earlier social-critical work, and we attempted to develop a piece with a sometimes working title of "Anti-Design: Notes for a Manifesto on Modern and Postmodern Artifice." The

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- 12 See, e.g., Gaston Bachelard, *La psych-analyse du feu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949) and *Poétique de l'espace* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1957).
- 13 Ivan Illich and Barry Sanders, *ABC: The Alphabetization of the Popular Mind* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1988).
- 14 Milman Parry, *Les formules et la métrique d'Homère* (Paris: Société d'éditions "Les belles lettres", 1928); Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960); and Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963).
- 15 Ivan Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).
- 16 Martin Heidegger, *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit: Zu Platons Höhlengleichnis und Theätet, Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 34 (Frankfurt am Main: V. Klostermann, 1988), 10.
- 17 Ivan Illich, *In the Mirror of the Past: Lectures and Addresses 1978–1990* (New York: Marion Boyars, 1992), 9–10.

first paragraph of one version (Fall 1994) of this incomplete project read as follows:

Contra the widely promoted belief that design is something all human beings do and have done throughout history, but now must do more consciously and thoroughly than ever before, design is something that has had a history. Its beginnings can be traced to the rise of modernity, and it will almost certainly come to an end with the modern project. Indeed, we have an obligation not so much to promote designing as to learn to live without it, to resist its seductions, and to turn away from its pervasive and corrupting influence.

The argument in support of this thesis was to be two-fold. In the first instance, design (especially engineering, but also architectural design) was not capable of achieving what it promises in the way of and expanded control and the well-managed reduction of unintended consequences. In the second, even insofar as it did achieve such goals, design as practiced by experts and professionals ultimately would dehumanize the world. The aim was to reanimate the moral criticism of designing as a lack of proportionality in ambition and contrivance.

One modest result of this aborted effort was the offering, in fall of 1995, of a two-week seminar in the Architecture Department, conducted by Illich and his long-time colleague Jean Robert. Robert, an architect, born in Switzerland but now a resident of Mexico, was a tireless worker on questions of alternative technology design and “design by people”—the latter extending the ideas of John Turner’s *Housing by People: Towards Autonomy in Building Environments*.¹⁸ Illich also had been teaching a seminar at the University of Pennsylvania, in the Graduate Program in Architecture, directed by Joseph Rykwert, whose *The Idea of a Town: The Anthropology of Urban Form in Rome, Italy and the Ancient World*¹⁹ gave respect to the intuitive, vernacular, premodern traditions of city construction. The Illich-Robert seminar provided a critical review of developments in design that tended to turn place and landscape into managed space, depriving people of both roots and autonomy. What Illich had once heard Jacques Maritain say of planning, “*C’est une nouvelle espèce du péché de présomption*,” Illich and Robert applied to design.²⁰

An alternative, for Illich and Robert, is design in a fundamentally different sense, one that did not presume to social control and individualistic self-realization, but instead sought to promote social solidarity, live in harmony with greater orders, and to dwell.²¹ Too often design treats the world as an enemy rather than a friend, and calls in experts to manipulate and manage. What Illich and Robert imagined was a design based on friendship, mutual give and take, respect for the world, and ultimately suffering, in the positive sense of creatively accepting and affirming limitations.

18 John Turner, *Housing by People: Towards Autonomy in Building Environments* (London: Marion Boyars, 1976).

19 Joseph Rykwert, *The Idea of a Town: The Anthropology of Urban Form in Rome, Italy and the Ancient World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).

20 David Cayley, *Ivan Illich in Conversation* (Concord, Ontario: Anansi, 1992), 62.

21 See Ivan Illich, “Dwelling” in *In the Mirror of the Past* (1992), 55–64; and Jean Robert, *Trust People* (Mexico, DF: Habitat International Coalition, 1996).

An Illich Community of Scholars

Illich's thought and life have had a strong influence on a circle of friends whose own insightful and independent work has its own implications for design. The works of Valentina Borremans, Jean Robert, and Joseph Rykwert have already been mentioned. Other representative works from what might be called the Illich community of reflection are, for example, William Arney's *Experts in the Age of Systems*,²² Barbara Duden's *The Woman Beneath the Skin: A Doctor's Patients in Eighteenth-Century Germany* and *Disembodying Women: Perspectives on Pregnancy and the Unborn*,²³ Wolfgang Sachs's *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power*,²⁴ David Schwartz's *Crossing the River: Creating a Conceptual Revolution in Community and Disability* and *Who Cares? Rediscovering Community*,²⁵ Uwe Pörksen's *Plastic Words: The Tyranny of a Modular Language*,²⁶ Lee Hoinacki's *El Camino: Walking to Santiago de Compostela* and *Stumbling toward Justice: Stories of Place*,²⁷ Madhu Suri Prakash and Gustavo Esteva's *Escaping Education: Living as Learning within Grassroots Cultures* and *Grassroots Post-Modernism: Remaking the Soil of Culture*.²⁸ A younger generation of scholars strongly influenced by Illich also shows promise for contributing to this tradition: Andoni Alowo, Samar Farage, Silja Samerski, Sajay Samuel, and Matthias Rieger, to mention only a few.

22 William Arney, *Experts in the Age of Systems* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1991).

23 Barbara Duden, *The Woman Beneath the Skin: A Doctor's Patients in Eighteenth-Century Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991) and *Disembodying Women: Perspectives on Pregnancy and the Unborn* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

24 Wolfgang Sachs, ed., *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power* (London: Zed Books, 1992).

25 David Schwartz, *Crossing the River: Creating a Conceptual Revolution in Community and Disability* (Cambridge, MA: Brookline Books, 1992) and *Who Cares? Rediscovering Community* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997).

26 Uwe Pörksen, *Plastic Words: The Tyranny of a Modular Language* (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 1995).

27 Lee Hoinacki, *El Camino: Walking to Santiago de Compostela* (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 1996) and *Stumbling toward Justice: Stories of Place* (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 1999).

28 Madhu Suri Prakash and Gustavo Esteva *Escaping Education: Living as Learning within Grassroots Cultures* (London: Zed Books, 1998); and Gustavo Esteva and Madhu Suri Prakash, *Grassroots Post-Modernism: Remaking the Soil of Culture* (London: Zed Books, 1998).