

Ivan Illich. 1926-2002

by Jordan Bishop

Obituaries in the mainstream press have described Ivan Illich as a sociologist." He had been connected with a university department in that discipline for the past ten years. And he would, no doubt, have enjoyed the understatement. For if we can say anything about the life and work of this extraordinary man, we must perhaps begin by noting that he utterly transcended disciplinary boundaries, both as a person and in his work. His dedication to history would not, in fact, have endeared him to many practitioners of sociology as we know it. And in fact, if we may recall Max Weber, we might say that Ivan Illich spent his life breaking out of the iron cages of conventional wisdom. Ivan revelled in the unorthodox, yet he was at the same time the most traditional of men. He preferred to sing the psalms in the Latin of Jerome's vulgate, which has been criticised as being best sung by ploughmen. He revered scholarship and learning, and detested schools, precisely because these were often, he contended, the death of scholarship and learning. Coming to adolescence in the years of a totalitarian state, he was forced to leave school in Vienna because of his Jewish background. Is it too much to suggest that some of the roots of his distaste for "total" institutions – such as schools, prisons, hospitals and self-regulating markets – came from this early clash, and his removal to the more anarchistic social climate of Italy? He persevered in institutions of learning, but was never captured by them. He studied science but did not make a career of it. He became a priest but was restless within the iron cage of the Church, even as he loved and respected the Church, which he once described as "a whore, but my mother."

It was then perhaps natural that his first venture into the breaking up of iron cages was directed at the Church. When Ivan began working as a priest in New York City, in the 1950s, New York was already one of the biggest Latino cities in the world, with over a million Spanish-speaking people. Church authorities were desperate. How could their priests "communicate" with these people, bring them into the fold, teach them to be "normal" pious American Christians. He organized language-training for priests, and to ensure that they got in touch with the real world of Latino New York, employed unemployed teenagers from the streets of East Harlem to teach Spanish to the gringo priests. When the Catholic Church in the United States, in the context of the cold war, embarked on a grand plan to send missionaries to Latin America to save them from Communism, Ivan established a centre in Cuernavaca where would-be missionaries could learn Spanish, and learn something about the Latin America where they were to work. It was soon discovered by "authorities" that the centre in Cuernavaca was in fact highly subversive. Even as men and women learned Spanish in Cuernavaca, they also learned that cultural imperialism was not the way to approach pastoral work in Latin America. And they were, in effect, "vaccinated" against this latter-day imperialism. Some Church authorities removed their subjects from Cuernavaca or discouraged them from going there. But it was too late. The iron cage was already broken. And while one could say that this was not due only to Ivan and his work (he would have been the last one to make such a claim) but to a wider movement in the Church, the critical spirit that characterized Cuernavaca went hand in hand with the critical Spirit that was to result in the Second Vatican Council.

Ivan was never one to look back. Others, many others, would question the iron cage of the Church, in Latin America and elsewhere. And as they did, Ivan embarked on a critique of educational institutions, the manifesto of which was his book *Deschooling Society*. And again, when this gathered momentum, he moved on to a critique of the medical establishment, and then to a long and prophetic struggle against the very idea of "homo oeconomicus." It was here that his path crossed that of the late Karl Polanyi, for whom the definition of man as "an economic animal" was also the object of a life-long critique. Polanyi, it should be added, was another thinker who could not be caged within the boundaries of a "discipline". And given the resurgence of neoliberalism, particularly after the general economic downturn of the 1970s, this last struggle was to continue until Ivan's death. Like that of Polanyi, Ivan's critique of capitalism included a profound respect for the way that people had organized their lives in the past. Like Polanyi, Ivan was very much aware of the fact that economic liberalism, and the theory of modern economics, involved a deeply alienating imposition of the abstract ideas of our own age on the concrete realities of other ages. And parallels in fact go further. Polanyi had insisted strongly that the negative impact of the industrial revolution was not simply a matter of "economic exploitation" and of poverty imposed from above. It was more than

anything else, a destruction of culture, a destruction of meaning. Polanyi was quite explicit in applying this same criterion to the havoc wreaked on traditional societies by European colonialism. And here again, Ivan Illich was very much in tune with the critique of Polanyi, in his often-repeated defence of what he called "vernacular culture," against the destructive forces of what is now called "globalisation."

Ivan Illich was not only a breaker of idols and of iron cages. He was, to an amazing degree, a friend. For Ivan friendship, the *philia* of the Greeks, was of signal importance. Two weeks before his death I had telephoned him at his home in Bremen. Our brief conversation was the last chapter in a friendship of over forty years. His last words to me were: "Give my love to your lady", my wife Joan, who had enjoyed that friendship as I had. He will not be forgotten.

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