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Ivan Illich, 76, Philosopher Who Challenged Status Quo, Is Dead

By DOUGLAS MARTIN (<http://www.nytimes.com/2002/12/04/obituaries/04ILLI.html>)

Ivan Illich, a onetime Roman Catholic priest who, through a steady flow of books and articles preached counterintuitive sociology to a disquieted baby-boom generation, died on Monday at his home in Bremen, Germany. He was 76.

Celia Samerski, a student of his at the University of Bremen, said the specific cause of death was not known. She said he also had a home in Cuernavaca, Mexico.

Mr. Illich was perhaps best known for his 1971 book, "De-Schooling Society," which protested mandatory public education and the institutionalization of learning. Along with works like Paul Goodman's, "Growing Up Absurd: Problems of Youth in the Organized Society," published in 1960, it provided grist for a society's growing ambivalence about educational institutions and much else.

Mr. Illich was a priest who thought there were too many priests, a lifelong educator who argued for the end of schools and an intellectual sniper from a perch with a wide view. He argued that hospitals cause more sickness than health, that people would save time if transportation were limited to bicycles and that historians who rely on previously published material perpetuate falsehoods.

His intellectual ordnance of anarchist panache, hatred of bureaucracy, Jesuitic argumentation, deep reverence for the past and watered-down Marxism, was applied to many targets, including relations between the sexes. More often than not, his conclusions were startling: he thought life was better for women in pre-modern times.

Critics often picked holes in his complex, verbose arguments, but not a few hailed them as illuminating critiques of large problems. Anatole Broyard, writing in The New York Times in 1971, said that his nitpicks were "like criticizing the grammar of someone who has just delivered a speech that gave us goose pimples."

But after his 1970's heyday, interest in Mr. Illich's ideas appeared to wane. Speaking invitations declined, and even some that still came dripped with nostalgia: Mayor Jerry Brown of Oakland, who was called Governor Moonbeam when he

was governor of California and consorted with out-of-the-box thinkers like R. Buckminster Fuller and Mr. Illich, invited him to a conference in 2000.

By 1989, Mr. Broyard wrote in an article about winnowing books from his library that he would "especially" discard Mr. Illich's works.

Mr. Illich was born on Sept. 4, 1926, in Vienna. He is survived by two brothers, Micha, of Manhattan, and Sascha, of Nantucket, Mass.

His father, a civil engineer, descended from Dalmatian royalty. His mother was a Sephardic Jew, and Ivan was expelled from a school in Vienna in 1941 because of her background. He went on to study in Florence and Rome and in Salzburg, where he wrote his doctoral dissertation on the historian Arnold Toynbee.

Mr. Illich came to the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan in 1952 after being ordained as a priest in Rome. He particularly attended to the needs of Puerto Ricans, helping establish an employment agency among other things. In an interview with The New Yorker magazine in 1970, the Rev. John Connolly, one of his colleagues, called him "their Babe Ruth."

The article said that early in his career as a priest, Father Illich began to criticize the church for "its smugness, its bureaucracy and its chauvinism." But his energy and intellect propelled him to the position of vice rector of the Catholic University of Ponce in Puerto Rico. He was forced out in 1960 for opposing the local bishop's forbidding of Catholics to vote for a governor who advocated state-sponsored birth control.

After being recalled briefly to New York, he was assigned to Cuernavaca, a small city 50 miles west of Mexico City where he established the Intercultural Center for documentation to teach priests and laymen who wanted to become Latin American volunteers.

Mr. Illich's criticisms of church doctrine ranged beyond his advocacy of birth control, and in 1969 he was branded "politically immoral" by the Vatican and left the priesthood.

Among other things, he disagreed with the church policy of increasing the number of priests in Latin America. He believed that the church could be

revived only by lay people, a populist view that he later applied first to education and then to other institutions.

"Illich is not against schools or hospitals as such, but once a certain threshold of institutionalization is reached, schools make people more stupid, while hospitals make them sick," wrote Matthias Finger and Jose Manuel Asu'n in "Adult Education at the Crossroads: Learning Our Way Out" (Zed Books, 2001).

"And more generally, beyond a certain threshold of institutionalized expertise, more experts are they produce the counter effect of what they set out to achieve," they continued.

The Life of Ivan Illich

To the Editor:

Your Dec. 4 obituary of Ivan Illich, the priest, philosopher and historian, failed to capture the essence of this extraordinary man's life – his profound critique of modern assumptions of scarcity and the dehumanizing effects of technological dependency.

Mr. Illich was a deeply spiritual man who embodied in his way of life a radical Christian simplicity. His understanding of the past and his cheerful embrace of suffering set him apart. He called for asceticism and the art of friendship, not "watered-down Marxism" or "anarchist panache."

In a world obsessed with longevity and freedom from pain, Mr. Illich studied and practiced the art of suffering. He was a man of rare genius and classic erudition. He was also a wonderful friend.

JERRY BROWN

Mayor

Oakland, Calif., Dec. 4, 2002

Mr. Illich's sweeping conclusions struck some readers as too sweeping, and others as plain wrong. Peter Sparkman in The New York Times Book Review in 1971 criticized "De-Schooling Society" as not only "a mind-bending litany of abstraction" but as a distraction from schools' all too real problems. He called it "an exceedingly bad book written by an exceedingly good man."

But Mr. Illich relished surprise, and his ideas almost always did. "We must have a sarcastic readiness for all surprises," he said in The New Yorker interview, "including the ultimate surprise of death."

To the Editor,

I read your Dec. 4 obituary of Ivan Illich with disgust. The suggestion that Ivan Illich's life amounted to 76 years of sustained hypocrisy and intellectual terrorism reflects far more about the intellectual and political climate in which we now sadly find ourselves in the U.S. than it does about Ivan's life and work. Any erstwhile rural worker now trapped in one of the world's many sprawling urban slums, any patient suffering from antibiotic-resistant strains of disease, and any student who mortgages his or her life for a B.A. that proves as useless economically as it was costly to procure is suffering from the very ills which Ivan predicted would become the legacy of modernity. How preposterous to suggest that his prescient critiques of so-called development, progress and modernity amount to little more than "intellectual ordnance of anarchist panache"!

Marina Illich, New York