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Renouncement and Askesis

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Renouncement and Askesis

Ivan Illich died in his home in Bremen on the 2nd of December.

Illich's work is construed around the questioning and the consequent renouncement of fundamental "obvious" social beliefs and institutions of modernity. His radical critique of industrial modernity is inspired neither by some idea of "social engineering" nor by a future utopia or nostalgia for the past. The "past is a foreign country" from where we can observe the present, relativize it and free ourselves from its certainties.

Illich was born to a Catholic Croatian father and a Sephardic Jewish mother in Vienna in 1926. He studied crystallography, philosophy, history and theology. In 1950, as a young priest, he chose not to follow the professional Church career that his family status and his abilities would very likely bring him in the upper ranks of the Catholic Church. He asked to be posted in the Porto Rican neighborhood of New York and succeeded in incorporating the poor community of newly arrived emigrants in the Catholic Church of the city.

A decade later –already vice-chancellor of the Catholic University of Porto Rico in Ponce– refuses to collaborate with the politicians and the clerics that worked for the creation of a Christian-Democratic party in Porto Rico and threatened with excommunication those that would vote for supporters of birth control policies.

Around the same time refuses to continue to support the institution of compulsive schooling in which he recognizes the main social tool with which the modern state gets people used in the logic of a service society and delivers them in the power of professional experts. In his book *Deschooling Society* (1971) provocatively proposes the abolition of compulsive schooling, i.e. of the ritual process in which the youngsters of a society have to sit in a certain class for certain hours and be taught by a teacher- who has the right to do this simply because he has consumed a larger amount of "education"-and asks for its substitution by institutions that help the natural curiosity and man's innate ability for active learning.

In the early sixties he leaves Porto Rico and establishes himself in Guernavaca, Mexico, where, next to a successful school of fast learning the Spanish language, he organizes the famous Center for Intercultural Documentation (CIDOC) where flourished a fertile critique of the policy of development and expansion of the industrial/capitalist mode throughout the world.

Very soon he opposed again the Catholic Church refusing to follow her in supporting the interventionist policies of U.S.A in South America. The break this time is final. Illich declares his "irrevocable decision to resign entirely from Church service, to suspend the exercise of priestly functions, and to renounce totally all titles, offices, benefits and privileges which are due to me as a cleric".

Illich has not stopped writing against the policy of development and the various forms it took for the last fifty years. He contemns both Truman's dogma and the attempts for technological planet-scale management that are the topics of discussions and agreements in the Environmental Summits. According to Illich, development is a manipulating tool of domination that destroys the cultural diversity and gets used millions of people in the logic of industrial socie-

ty, while it is unlikely that the continuously invented “universal human needs” of all men and women will be ever satisfied. The essays in the *Development Dictionary* (1992) witness his important contribution to the discredit of the idea of development.

In his work *Tools for Conviviality* (1973) he elaborates a more general critique of the industrial state and its tools. By tools, Illich means the hammer and the digital computer as well as social institutions and service systems like the health and education systems, the telephone or the highway networks etc. Illich claims that the use of tools is useful for a society only if it doesn't pass a certain level. When this is surpassed, the tool is transmogrified to a radical monopoly and produces “disvalue”-throws a negative shadow on the whole of society. He suggests that we move beyond the distinction between left/right, that answers the question “Who is owning the means of production?” into the distinction between convivial/manipulative tools. To manipulative tools that create artificial environments inside of which men and women can not live without using them, he opposes the convivial tools that everyone can use easily, anytime and for his or her purposes. To the almost devilish promises of a planetary society based on endless production and consumption, Illich opposes the convivial communities –the self-limitation (austerity) of “which does not exclude all pleasures but only those which are distracting from or destructive of personal relatedness”. This practice of self-limitation is the only antidote against the technocratic, managerial economic austerity that the few enforce to the many. In this sense, indeed one can reach socialism only by bicycling in his or her own rhythm in the neighborhoods of the world and not by driving a car –even if it is the latest model of environment friendly technology- in the highways of the globalised market, under continuous surveillance.

In *Shadow Work* (1981) and *Gender* (1982), Illich, inspired by Karl Polanyi and Paul Dumont attempted to study the ways with which modern man reach a self understanding as “a needy human being in a condition of scarcity”, as “homo economicus”.

In 1973, with *Medical Nemesis*, Illich exemplarily attacked one more sacred cow of modernity, modern medicine, not only because, due to its size, it dysfunctions quite often, nor only because nowhere in the world people have unequal access to its services. But mainly because modern medicine destroys man's ability to cope with pain, disease and death as constitutive elements of his very being. Wherever modern medicine dominates, man learns to sustain his medicalized health following the advice of professional experts and is incapable to cope when it does not comply with some abstract, statistical determined norm. He analyses then the modern medical profession as one among many “dominating professions” that in alliance with the State turn themselves into “legal monopolies with the power to satisfy the needs they themselves have imputed into their clients”. Failure to comply with their suggestions is labeled “inexcusable antisocial behavior”.

In the 90's, Illich turned his critical abilities to the new abstract concept of Life that is detached from concrete persons and whose survival should be secured in the under surveillance womb, the intensive care room, the planet in danger. The “reality” of this Life has been advanced by a peculiar alliance between science, technology, the Churches and the bioethical committees. Respect for this Life is not but the triumph of a new “religiosity” based on newly constructed imaginary entities and constitutes the most developed tool of manipulation. Only

through an “epistemological askesis” that shows the peculiar mode their “reality” is constituted by, it is possible to exorcise those face-eating phantasms.

Since the mid 80’s Illich coped with a tumor that he refused to have it operated on. He chose not to turn himself into a client of the public or private medical services that provide medicalized health. Till his final hour he went on weaving around him a fragile community where men and women from all over the world are still learning one from another and husband their friendship creating a “minimum space where they can agree in searching the Good”.