

# IVAN ILLICH

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Ivan Illich was one of the most radical thinkers of the late 20th century. In the 1970s, from his think-tank in Mexico, he had a major impact on international readers, especially the young, through his radically anti-technocratic, anti-institutional arguments on health, education, transport and energy. *Deschooling Society* (1971) argued that school rendered people unlearned, and *Medical Nemesis: The Appropriation of Health* (1975) argued that health professionals were endangering patients' wellbeing.

In one sense, Illich was a sociologist and political scientist; he held a part-time post under these scholastic rubrics at Fordham University, New York, from 1968. But he was acutely wary of enrolment in any political movement, and he abandoned the term "philosopher" on his passport after an Arab threw himself at his feet, transfixed by the description.

Finally, he opted for the term "historian". Yet the only past era that won his prolonged attention was medieval Europe, largely through its literature, which he believed, like his fellow dreamer G. K. Chesterton, was the key to wisdom.

Illich dreamt of a society of freedom, equality and fraternity, but he was not a realistic planner towards these goals, and he gradually retreated into thought rather than action — though a close circle of friends did take on his mantle. On the rare occasions that he visited Britain he was keener to engage with university professors than to travel around investigating real social conditions.

Ivan Illich was born in Vienna. His father was a Roman Catholic Croatian landowner, his mother a Sephardic Jew. His grandfather raised him in Vienna. Later he gained fluency in 14 languages; yet he often stated that he had no mother tongue. Nazism forced his family to leave Austria and he ended his schooling in Florence.

At Florence University he researched history and crystallography, pursuing wider interests in psychology and art history. He went to Rome in 1943 and began to study as a priest at the Gregorian University, the Vatican's agency for higher education. Illich also obtained a doctorate in history from the University of Salzburg.

In 1951, he was assigned to pastoral work in New York with Puerto Ricans, to whom he became passionately committed. In 1956 he moved on, as Vice-Rector, to Puerto Rico's Catholic University, where he acquired an active hostility to a "Yankee" model of religion applied to Hispanic society. That led to a running feud with the Catholic

hierarchy, especially when he attacked a bishop who issued an interdict against voting for a pro-birth control candidate in an election for governor, after that clash he was recalled to New York in 1960. In 1959, aged 33, he was made a Monsignor, one of the youngest in the world at the time.

He set off on a 3,000-mile trip by horse and foot across South America from Santiago to Caracas, seeking out a new arena for work. In Colombia, he managed to stop the distribution of milk powder in famine areas by missionaries, who were aiming, as he saw it, to win extra leverage by giving the powder to Christians only. This hasty action led directly, he later admitted, to the death of a dozen children, and it was to haunt him in the following years.

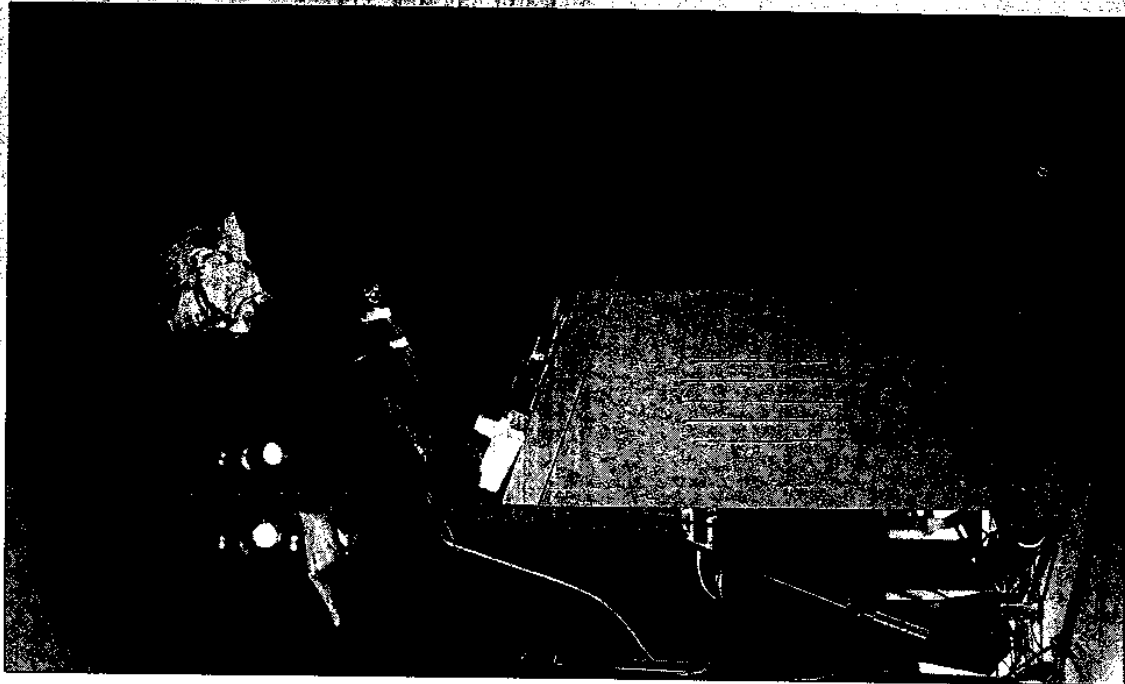
In 1961 he set up the Intercultural Centre for Documentation in Mexico City, which sought to accumulate information that could be used by people and leaders alike, rather as Mass Observation did in Britain, and which offered crash courses in what later came to be called "de-Yankification" for would-be missionaries to Latin America. Later it evolved as an outlet for radical thinking on Latin American issues and key Western social-cultural problems. Its classes centred on dynamic group therapy to excise culturally imperialist assumptions. *Time* magazine noted of his style with students: "He yells at them and lectures them, plays and prays with them, insults them and drinks with them."

Catholic priests and laymen often came to the centre. But Illich ran into trouble with the Church when he regularly rejected many of those who had enrolled as being unfit for an anti-American overhaul. Right-wing Catholic groups in Mexico came to see him as a *bête noire*.

In June 1968 he was called to Rome for a heresy-hunting interview on his beliefs and views. Although it did not in the end convict him, in January 1969 the Vatican banned attendance by priests at the centre. He leaked the details of the investigation to *The New York Times*; he had been accused of a role in the Archbishop of Guatemala's kidnap. Two months later he voluntarily gave up the priesthood, retaining a commitment to celibacy.

In the centre's role as a think-tank a key preoccupation was education. *Deschooling Society*, Illich's most famous book, came out in 1971 and introduced his name to a wider, global audience. Convinced that the West's education system was collapsing through bureaucracy, numbers and the cult of professionalism, he argued against diplomas, certificates

Radical thinker who believed that schools were bad for pupils but who retreated into thought at the expense of action



Illich: challenged assumptions about technology and modern institutions

and the institutionalisation of learning. "Inquiries into a man's learning history," he said, "should be taboo."

Indeed, he wanted computer networks to link givers and receivers of knowledge and ready outlets for those who wished

Other books flowed from his pen through the 1970s, often after intense think-tank sessions. *Tools for Conviviality* (1973) widened the scope of his technocratic targets to include television (for numbing conversation) and cars (for choking cities). *Energy and Equity* (1974) set out the pro-bicycle case, though Illich was often accused of hypocrisy for travelling by jet. He was in demand across the world at lectures and seminars, where he applied a coruscating Socratic technique to unsettle academic assumptions.

*Medical Nemesis: The Appropriation of Health* (1975) argued that the health professions had become an active menace to their patients, and he popularised the word "iatrogenesis" to describe a disease induced by doctors. His remedy was that patients, with products in their own hands made available by the medical sector, treated themselves. *The Right to Useful Unemployment and its Professional Enemies* (1975) took the attack on to other specialist priesthoods claiming a monopoly of knowledge in their fields. He later applied the model to industrial designers and salesmen.

His books became progressively less alert to practical issues, more absorbed in intellectual history, probing popular attitudes and assumptions over time. They included *ABC: The Alphabetisation of the Popular Mind* (1988) and *In the Vineyard of the Text* (1993), which reflected a new focus on medieval literature.

The Intercultural Centre for Documentation closed down in 1976 but alternative outlets emerged in German universities, where he was highly popular. He held visiting professorships at Kassel, Oldenburg, and Marburg.

His attacks on professions, neatly paradoxical as they were, often failed to make direct contact with life on the ground in mass society. His acute intelligence was not in doubt, however; on one occasion, he picked up a fluent knowledge of modern Greek in a day from a hotel gardener.

But his realism was debatable. Most of his later life was spent in a mud hut — aristocratically aloof, austere, absorbed but happy, just outside Mexico City. This gave him a very odd perspective on the real problems of the urban industrial West.

He was also a visiting professor at Penn State University and taught in Bremen, where he died having suffered for some time from cancer.

Ivan Illich, anti-institutional writer, was born on September 24, 1926. He died on December 2, 2002, aged 76.

to attack received ideas within the educational nexus. It was the inefficiency of standard structures that appalled him. He held that an adult could absorb the contents of 12 years' schooling in one or two years.