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**ECOLOGY AND THE STRUCTURE OF
SOCIETY**
(Lecture note)

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My topic allows me to reflect more about myself than about the work of Ivan Illich himself. That is fortunate, since I would have difficulty writing a paper on Illich's ecological interest and thought. Indeed, I doubt that the reading of Illich has led many people to give sustained attention to ecology. Certainly that was not his own focus although he was fully aware of the ecological crisis.

Widespread concern about the ecological crisis arose in the late sixties without any influence of Illich of which I am aware. Nevertheless, the encounter with Illich cannot but affect the way one thinks in general and about the relation of human beings to the natural world in particular. Certainly it has affected my understanding of the crisis and of the way best to respond to it.

To identify the influence of Illich on me requires remembering how I was thinking in the early seventies before I began to read him. The 1960s had been a time of painful rethinking for me as for many others. The Vietnam War, the more intense awareness of the Black perspective, and also the growing understanding of the Native American experience combined to undermine radically my partly conscious sense of "American" virtue. I felt this keenly and painfully, although my sense of identity as an American was already complicated.

Growing up in Japan, attending a Canadian school, and having classmates of many nationalities intensified my sense of identity as an American. The sight of the flag of the United States stirred me deeply, and I felt a special thrill when our ship landed in an American port and I could touch the soil of my homeland. Although I was strongly inclined toward pacifism, I decided it was right to fight for my country in World War II.

I thought of the United States basically as a bastion of democracy that had fought two wars to save Europe from evil forces. I read this virtue back into the founding of the colonies and their revolt against Britain. Of course, I was aware in some peripheral way of the mistreatment of Indians and Blacks, but somehow I saw that as secondary to the main story.

Even so, my identity as an American was complicated by the fact that I knew that I was also a Southerner. Accordingly, when I read about the Civil War, called by Southerners, the War Between the States, I identified with the Confederate armies, experiencing their defeat with pain. Nevertheless, at another level I was glad that there was a united United States, and I identified strongly with that. My Southern identity was further complicated by my knowledge not only that the Confederate armies fought for a hopeless cause but also that they fought for an immoral one. I mention this because I learned early that one can identify with one's people while recognizing their crimes.

In the sixties, this double experience was extended to the United States as a whole. I saw that the European settlement of North America was an imperial invasion and that the expansion

over the continent came near to being genocide of the people whose land was being unjustly taken. I saw how fundamental racism had been not only in the South, but also in the nation as a whole. I saw that our relation to the whole of Latin America had long been exploitative and imperialistic rather than protective of the freedom of Latin countries from European empires. I felt deep alienation without ceasing to be formed by my identity as a part of the Euro-American citizenship of the United States. It was then, and still is, very much *my* nation from which I feel alienated.

I also brought to the sixties a strong identity as a Christian. Until then I had a partly conscious sense of Christian virtue as well. Of course, I knew that individual Christians and the church as a whole had done bad things, but I thought of these crimes as part of the human condition of sinfulness rather than as peculiarly Christian. Beginning in the sixties I was forced to recognize that Christian teaching itself has been responsible at least in major part, for horrendous crimes: the persecution of Jews culminating in the Holocaust, patriarchal domination and exploitation of women, contempt for people of different religious commitments, colonialism, sexual repression, an anthropocentrism that resulted in the devastating exploitation of the natural environment, and much else.

In spite of this realization, I have not been alienated from Christianity in quite the way I have been alienated from the American South or from the United States. This is because, as Christians became more vividly aware of their crimes, they repented, at least at important leadership levels. This means that the churches take seriously their commitment to ideals or norms that condemn these widespread abuses. With some enthusiasm, one can identify with this principle of repentance and with a tradition that repeatedly embraces and embodies it. The Southern states, on the other hand, have not repented for slavery or segregation or their continuing racism. The United States, on the other hand, has never acknowledged the wrong of slavery or undertaken to compensate those who suffered from it. It continues and intensifies its imperial and exploitative relations with the rest of the world without embarrassment, and it belies its official ideals of democracy and justice in its relations even to its own people. My self-identification as a white Southerner and as an American citizen of the dominant class is more painful than my self-identification as a Christian.

Awareness of the ecological crisis hit me hard toward the end of sixties. Of course, I recognized both American and Christian responsibility for this most profound threat to future human life. This threat still seems to me even more devastating than the cruelty of human beings to one another and to themselves. I entered the seventies with intense concern about this, a concern that tended to separate it from the social and political issues that had dominated my thought in most of the sixties. Initially I connected the ecological crisis chiefly to issues of population and consumption.

Since I am a Christian theologian, I felt it as my primary responsibility to participate in efforts to reorient Christian thinking away from its dualism and anthropocentrism toward a sense of human kinship with the natural world and of God's concern for it. Not because of what I did, but because many other Christians were responding to this, for us, new concern during the same period, the shift in official church thinking and teaching was rather rapid. For once I was on the winning side.

Of course, my real interest was in changing human behavior in the direction of sustainability. I wrote and spoke of the urgency of such change. I suppose I thought that if only enough people shared my perception of the urgency of change in human treatment of nature, they would reduce their rate of procreation and the quantity of their consumption. However, I rather quickly realized that changes in official teaching would take a long time to have any real effect on the thought patterns of most Christians and even longer to affect behavior. Simply describing the crisis and the need for a different attitude toward nature would, at best, have limited beneficial effects.

In the seventies I encountered thinkers who understood that the relation of human beings to the natural world and the ordering of human society are inseparable. They differed greatly, but all deepened my understanding. I will describe the impact on me of three of these: Paolo Soleri, Paul Shepard, and Ivan Illich. The first who affected me deeply was Soleri.

I encountered Soleri because I was working with a few students to identify people who not only recognized the seriousness of the ecological crisis but also had positive proposals about how to respond to it. We came across some of his early writings and designs. Some of us visited Soleri at the Cosanti Foundation in Scottsdale, Arizona, and he made a major presentation at the conference we organized in 1972 on "Alternatives to Catastrophe."

In Soleri's case, the impact on me was at a practical level more than a theoretical one. He showed me how closely ecological destruction is related to human habitat. If we spread our habitat out over the countryside, not only do we take land from agricultural uses or wilderness, we also create cities that depend on extensive networks of utilities. Especially we increase dependence on motor transportation, including the private automobile with its extravagant use of scarce resources, and its pollution of the atmosphere. Soleri showed me that a strikingly different, far more sustainable, form of habitat is possible.

He gave me hope in another way as well. My first reaction to the ecological crisis had been to call for frugality and sacrifice. Soleri showed me that simply arguing for smaller homes and lots was not the answer. His proposed way of organizing habitat could not only dramatically reduce pressure on space, resources, and sinks; it could also encourage community and create a far better context for bringing up children. Soleri gave me hope that it might be possible to attract people into a sustainable future rather than drive them to it by guilt or fear.

Sadly, I have to recognize that to date the attractive alternatives have not, by themselves, been effective. The old ways continue and typically grow more unsustainable all the time. Soleri's architectural ecologies or arcologies are viewed as interesting ideas, but there is little disposition to take them seriously as a solution to basic human problems. I now believe change will occur only under great pressure. But I continue to think that if there are positive images of a sustainable society, the requisite catastrophes will not have to be quite so extreme, and that the decisions to which they lead humanity are more likely to be positive ones.

The second great influence on me during the seventies was Paul Shepard. Shepard forced me to recognize that despite all my disillusionment, I still thought, at a fundamental level, in terms of progress. In particular, I assumed that civilization was an advance over pre-civilized life. It took only a little conversation, however, for Shepard to disabuse me of this assumption.

tion. Obviously, all the ancient civilizations of which we know were based on hierarchy and war, as well as on patriarchy. Slaves constructed all the great monuments of these civilizations, which so impress us today. Their cost drained resources from the peasants on whose backs these civilizations were built.

In contrast with life in ancient cities, Shepard described a much more attractive existence among hunting and gathering peoples. He taught that since humanity evolved chiefly during the hundreds of thousands of years of hunting and gathering, we are all genetically programmed for that lifestyle rather than for farming or herding, and especially in contrast to urban existence. Shepard looked back to a golden age lost to most of humanity long ago, and he sought to find ways of retaining some bits of it in the contemporary context.

I recognized that our distant ancestors, like the remaining hunters and gatherers, lived in a far more sustainable way than do we. I recognized that the quality of life among hunters and gatherers was far freer and more human than that of the peasants and slaves who constituted the dominant population of the ancient cities. Comparison of the hunting and gathering societies and contemporary cities shows even more dramatically the unsustainable character of the latter as well as the dehumanizing experience of many contemporary urbanites. But I could not be quite as enthusiastic about these ancestors as Shepard. The chief reason for my ambivalence, I suspect, was that I recognized my almost total lack of the skills required for survival in such a world. I also thought that I would find life there somewhat boring. Of course, I realized that if I had been born in that context, I would feel quite differently. But then I would be a different person.

Setting all this aside, it still seems to me that not all the changes that have occurred in the course of human history are negative. Even Shepard acknowledged that some of the music we enjoy is truly an advance over what was possible then. I will add an example from the realm of moral sensitivity.

I have been shaped by my Christian faith to think of situations from the point of view of others as well as from my own perspective. These other perspectives include those of other animals. Shepard, because of his personal interest in experiencing some of the values of hunting, decided to kill a bear. He relished the experience of hunting and killing the bear, while relating to it with the respect that even today is shown by some of the remaining hunting and gathering societies. But when I pressed him, he acknowledged that all the respect shown the bear in no way reduced the bear's suffering. Indeed, he thought, imagining the point of view of the bear was not part of the world that he celebrated. From my point of view, learning to transcend ourselves in this way is a gain I would not want to surrender, although I grant that our culture, overall, causes far more suffering to animals than did hunting and gathering societies.

In some respects the overall visions of Soleri and Shepard were at opposite poles. For Soleri, the past is dark. We must orient ourselves toward radical transformation in the future. His urban designs are intended to contribute to the universal spiritualization of matter, which, for him, is the eschatological hope. He has also drawn designs for space colonies that he thinks would advance the process of this spiritualization beyond this planet.

For Shepard, human life was at its best in the remote past. Each stage of change, normally depicted as progress, has been, in fact, a deeper fall into psychosocial disturbance. His book title, *Nature and Madness*, points to the contrast brilliantly developed in the book itself. Far from spiritualizing matter, the need is to naturalize human beings.

It is interesting that both Soleri and Shepard viewed Christianity as a major enemy. For Soleri, the worship of God the Father directs humanity backwards to the dark past. For Shepard, Christianity is the greatest cause of disaffection with what is given and thus the source of those changes that lead to greater madness. In my view, Shepard's analysis is more on target. Of course, much in Christianity has functioned conservatively and continues to do so. Some Christians seek to idealize a remote past. There are those who identify the eschatological future with a return to the Garden of Eden. But when we view Christianity in the context of the history of religions, what is distinctive is its future orientation. In the structure and content of the Bible, the final fulfillment differs markedly from the original condition. The Jewish prophets are sharply critical of the established situation. Although they often contrast it unfavorably with earlier conditions, they basically point toward a new world. This future orientation is heightened in the New Testament. The conviction is that in Christ God as worked a new thing. The anticipation is that God is bringing a new world into being.

That this eschatological hope, so deep-seated in Christianity, is dangerous has long been clear. It has been distorted into attempts to make the world over in the image of the fallible human actors. But Shepard was as concerned about its purest forms. These, too, alienate people from the given. They are a source of longing for the realization of a more just and peaceful order, which creates a restless dissatisfaction with the world as it is given. This in fact often leads to further madness.

Persuasive as Shepard was, I could not follow him all the way. As I have already stated, despite his impressive evidence of the positive quality of life in hunting and gathering societies, I could not picture myself, or people I knew, as happy in that life. Perhaps we have fallen so deeply into madness that we cannot imagine what it would be like to be sane. I grant Shepard that. But for me the appreciation of those societies and their way of life remains "academic" in the bad sense. I did not want to hunt and kill a bear in order to live in a way more appropriate to my genetic make-up. Furthermore, the ratio of men to bears is now such that encouraging such behavior among men would lead to the rapid extinction of bears.

Indeed, in terms of practical proposals little followed from my changed perceptions. My awareness of the evils of civilization and, especially, of its industrial form was intensified. I felt more strongly than before that we should support indigenous people everywhere in their struggle to maintain continuity with their cultural past. I recognized much more clearly that this was incumbent on us for our own sake as well as for the indigenous people. We have much to learn from them.

However, the prophetic principle shapes me too deeply to go further. I am, probably unalterably, oriented to hoping for a future that differs from anything that has been in the past. I long for a world more just and peaceful and sustainable than the one in which I find myself, and I am committed to do what I can to move toward such a world. Actually, I liked to point out to Shepard that he was himself a product of this prophetic tradition, one of the most radical of

late twentieth-century prophets, whose teaching generated deep alienation from the dominant practices and tendencies of our world. It was as a prophet, rather than as a counter-prophet, that I embraced him.

Shepard's weakness, in my perspective, was that his proposals for improvement were superficial in comparison with his analyses of the problem. Sadly, this is true of many prophets. But I hunger for positive vision. Celebrating the hunting and gathering societies of our ancestors did not supply that vision for me. There is obviously no way back unless the human population is reduced by ninety percent or more. I cannot hope for that, nor did Shepard. I do hope that population will decline, but gradually and because of human decisions. The decline I envisage will not lead to the possibility of renewing hunting and gathering as the norm.

I have characterized Shepard as celebrating the original human condition and Soleri as pointing to a distant future very different from anything that has existed thus far. My own inclination is to imagine a nearer future that would respond to the critical issues we now face, especially the ecological crisis. Soleri's arcologies seemed to me to be the kinds of answers we needed even though the more ultimate context in which his own vision located them does not seem helpful to me.

Ivan Illich spoke more directly to my concerns than either of the others. He, too, startled me with his insights. These were based in large part in his celebration of peasant village life. This was far nearer at hand than hunting and gathering societies and fairly recently in the past of many of us.

Despite the impact on me of awareness of the imperialism of the United States, of the ecological crisis, of Soleri, and of Shepard, I continued in the early seventies to suppose that it was important to improve the lot of the global poor. By most measures, most peasants were poor. Hence, even though I opposed further economic growth in general, I acknowledged the need for increased consumption among the poor. I took for granted that better education and better health care were important in such development.

Illich opened my eyes to the real meaning of development. We have been systematically attempting to improve the lot of the peasants by bringing them into the modern world. This destroys their communities, their way of life, and their self-respect. Illich gave us the vision by which we could appreciate what we were destroying and see the havoc caused by modernity not only on those we moderns were trying to develop but also on ourselves.

Until I encountered Illich's critique of schooling, it had not occurred to me to oppose the institution of schools either as a part of modern society or as an instrument of development. At most I recognized that schools should be culturally adjusted so that they would cease to educate people in ways that alienated them from their communities and prepared them for non-existent positions in society. Illich opened my eyes to the problematic character of the institutionalization of education.

This, of course, has immediate practical consequences. Nothing is more central to development programs than formal education. This education is in tension with the informal education in which all societies engage as they transmit their cultures and their technical skills from

generation to generation. To oppose schooling is to oppose development, and Illich became increasingly consistent in this respect.

After World War II, well-meaning people in the North almost universally supported development programs in the Third World. The churches took major leadership in this process. In the 1960s Illich did not oppose development as such. He saw that change was inevitable. But he did not want the church to associate itself with any one pattern of change. He was critical both of the "hierarch who wants to justify collections by increasing his service to the poor, and [of] the rebel-priest who wants to use his collar as an attractive banner in agitation." (*The Church, Change and Development*, page 17.)

The standard debate was between those who wanted to progress by dealing directly with the needs of the poor and those who were convinced that only when the poor gained power could their real needs be addressed. Illich would not take sides in this debate. He thought the church should avoid both directions. The only development in which the church should engage was development into Christ.

During the 1960s the global Catholic Church poured resources of personnel and of money into Latin America. Illich was highly critical especially of the sending of personnel. This was a new phase of colonialism, making the Latin American church once again dependent on the North. The people who came were far less effective than local people might be. The institutions created by external funding were unsustainable. Thus this great development program of the church, however well meaning, was misdirected, often doing more harm than good.

By the seventies, Illich directed his writings much less toward the church. It was the total impact of the North in Latin American that he assessed. However well meaning much of the effort to develop was, its net effects were disempowering of the local people and destructive of their communal life. Development brought its objects into a modern world to which they were poorly adapted and in which they were often poor in a far more degrading sense than had been the case before. Further, Illich increasingly saw that even those who succeeded in the modern world were still impoverished in relation to some of the values of the pre-modern world. If the institution of schooling was required in order to modernize, that certainly did not justify it.

Even more startling was Illich's analogous critique of the institutionalization and professionalization of health care. I had assumed that modern medicine had arrived at an ability to deal with many diseases that afflicted human kind in a way that would be universally beneficial. This seemed to be one unambiguous gift of modernity to humanity. But Illich saw that accepting this gift entailed disempowering people from taking care of themselves at a very fundamental level.

I am not entirely convinced by Illich's brilliant criticisms. I depend on professionals to take care of me and am glad to do so. I think many people around the world want and need this help. Similarly, I think that formal schooling can be beneficial even to traditional communities. Without it these communities are powerless to deal with the pressures of their modern environment. Not to make it available to those who want it seems to me unjust.

Nevertheless, as I envision the future, Illich's analyses strengthen my sense that opposing further economic growth is not the evil it is often depicted to be. You may be familiar with the standard argument. The poor need to consume four or five times as much as they now do in order to have a decent life. There is no way other than revolutionary violence by which resources can be taken from the rich and given to the poor or that growth can be directed only to the poor. Hence, the economy as a whole must grow to four or five times its present size in order to bring the poor out of their poverty. To oppose this is to condemn billions of people to misery.

In my judgment such growth is impossible. The world is already living unsustainably, and we will reach absolute limits long before total economic activity increases that much. In any case, the experience of the past fifty years shows that most of the poor do not benefit, even by standard economic measures, from overall global growth. Indeed, the methods used to achieve that growth typically lead to a deterioration of the lot of many of the poor. Even in instances when their income rises, they are frequently disempowered.

I believe Illich's analysis supports the conclusion that the only form of development that really improves the lot of the traditional poor is community development. In such development, the inhabitants of a village articulate their own goals and implement them. They may be assisted by outsiders, but only in ways that leave them in control. If new technology is involved, it must be a technology that does not make the community dependent on outsiders for its use and maintenance.

Whereas most people respond to such a picture by regarding it as condescending and unjust to the poor, Illich provides grounds for affirming the opposite. Empowerment within traditional communities rather than replacement of such communities by industrial cities is the true way to benefit the poor. Such empowerment involves technology, but not the technology that degrades the quality of human relations in the developed countries. Illich reflected on the optimum technology with an unmatched profundity.

His discussion of transportation makes points that, in principle, are of enormous practical importance. He argues that both animal transport and automobiles have serious negative effects. As human population grows, we cannot afford to share food with large numbers of animals. On the other hand, motor transportation is clearly unsustainable as well as destructive of human community. The bicycle increases the ability of human beings to get around without damaging the environment or weakening human community.

Sadly, at present, the predominant use of the bicycle is considered only a step in the development process. Developing societies still plan for a world of private automobiles. In China hundreds of millions of people use bicycles, but as soon as they can they afford cars, they take that next step. Yet it is physically impossible for Chinese cities to handle transportation the way it currently operates in southern California. The effort to do so only adds to pollution, to dependence on imported oil, and to using scarce agricultural lands for urban expansion, while employing funds badly needed for other purposes. It would be far better for China to design its cities around the bicycle in a way that would drastically limit the use of automobiles. What Illich shows us is that this would not be a restriction on an otherwise desirable form of development but an inherently beneficial change.

Here, too, it is clear that a socially desirable community is also an ecologically sustainable one. We should not think of the communities Illich depicts and commends as deprived. We should not see movement in that direction as a step backward, which we would take only because of dire necessity. Instead, he points us to a more human world, which is also far more sustainable. He contributes to the building up of a vision that may draw people into change without the dire necessity brought about by truly terrible catastrophes.

I have appropriated such insights from Soleri, Shepard, and Illich without advancing their thought. My own distinctive contribution has been in the realm of economic theory, which they have not directly discussed. Standard economic theory assigns no value whatever to human community. It is not surprising, accordingly, that the policies derived from it are consistently destructive of such community. The dominant practice is to measure progress by the quantity of market activity. Total market activity is greatest when the market is global. Accordingly, even national communities are undermined. Power is transferred systematically from governments to corporations. Formal education is needed to serve these corporations. Accordingly, it has less and less to do with transmitting traditional values from one generation to another or teaching youth how to relate to one another and to appreciate the values available in the cultural context. It is now supported almost entirely as a contribution to economic growth.

Standard economic theory is totally anthropocentric. The value of anything other than human beings is the price that human beings will pay for it. The policies that follow from this theory are systematically destructive of the natural environment. Defenders of the environment must appeal to concerns that are absent in this theory. Sometimes those in power simply ignore them and give a free hand to those who implement the policies supported by economic theory. The most for which environmentalists can hope is some compromise between supposed economic values and environmental concerns. Repeated compromise in the long run accomplishes little more than slowing the victory of economic considerations guided by the now controlling assumptions..

As long as this economic theory governs the affairs of the world, I fear that there is little chance to preserve the values to which, in various ways, Soleri, Shepard, and Illich are all committed. There is very little possibility of moving toward a sustainable world in which other species can flourish alongside human beings. The economic order itself becomes more and more precarious, with whole national economies collapsing along the way, causing misery for tens of millions of people.

It would be possible to think quite differently about the economy. Economics might ask what kinds of institutions and rules we need to produce and exchange goods and services in a sustainable way that would strengthen human community and regenerate the natural context. If those now trained as economists cannot ask such questions, we need to develop a distinct community of thinkers who do. Some steps in that direction are occurring in the various national societies for ecological economics as well as the international society. But their work needs to be deeply informed by the still-neglected kind of thinking pursued so brilliantly by Ivan Illich. Unless ecological economists think profoundly and wisely about human community, their proposals will still fall short.