

## Space in the City – “Prophets for Our Time” – 14 October 2009

### Ivan Illich

by Robert Hutchison

For the last 12 years I have been sleeping in a library; sometimes there is only a fraction of a second between the pleasure of reading and the joy of sleeping. On one of the upper shelves in our library/bedroom there are ten books by Ivan Illich. They were all bought between 1972 and 1983 and – until I started preparing this talk – for more than a quarter of a century I hadn’t looked at one of these books. Indeed when I took them down from their shelf a few weeks ago, a puff of dust was clearly visible. In the last two months I have added two of Illich’s last books to my collection – both of them based on interviews with the Canadian writer and broadcaster David Cayley.

Like Vincent Donovan and Lesslie Newbigin – the subjects of the two previous talks in this series – Illich spent crucial periods of his life in developing countries. Donovan worked in Tanzania, Newbigin in India, Illich spent much of his life in Puerto Rico and Mexico – what he said about the work of the Catholic Church and about schools and hospitals, was written out of his experiences in those two countries in particular. I first discovered Illich when I was working in Tanzania and my parents sent me out a copy of *The Listener*, 16 December 1971, the first five pages of which were devoted to Illich and his ideas.

Illich was born in Vienna in 1926 into a family with Jewish, Dalmatian and Catholic roots. He once described himself as a wandering Jew and a Christian pilgrim. His life can be divided into three periods: the first 34 years, the years of his upbringing and education and the time in which he found his feet among Puerto Ricans, first in New York and then in Puerto Rico; then in the 1960s and 1970s he was at his most prolific as a writer and most influential as a radical thinker; and thirdly the last 20 or so years of his life about which more later. Illich was a priest who thought there were too many priests; and after being summoned by the Holy Office in Rome and failing to co-operate with an inquiry into what the authorities called his “dangerous” doctrinal views, his “erroneous” ideas about the Church, and his “bizarre” conceptions of the priesthood, he left the priesthood in 1969, although he did not abandon his vow of celibacy or his daily reading of the Office.

Illich was a fully paid up member of the awkward squad, for ever speaking truth to power, questioning conventional wisdom, constantly developing and seeking to elucidate his ideas, but always the man of faith. I think that he was prophetic in a number of ways. He recognised aspects of the human condition – and the

effects of social and economic structures – to which others were blind. He described crises and challenges the full consequences of which have only been realised decades ahead. But it must also be said that on the face of it, and, like many prophets, some of what he prophesied seems to have been wildly inaccurate. To take one example. In the 1960s he wrote: *‘I expect that by the end of this century, what we now call school will be a historical relic, developed in the time of the railroad and the private automobile and discarded along with them’*. Now, 40 years later schools are still being built all over the world, there are new investments in railroads and one of the most popular programmes on television is about the pleasures of driving automobiles as fast as possible. However while this talk is not a defence of Illich, I do want to argue that, whatever our own core beliefs or faith, Illich’s fearless questioning of established institutions, the constant challenging of conventional wisdom, and his recognition that our industrial society is deeply off course, all these are as relevant as ever, in many ways even more pertinent than when he was writing.

I want to highlight a small number of his key ideas firstly from the books of the 1970s, and then from the interviews that he gave David Cayley in the 1980s and 1990s. The Illich of the 1990s can be clearly seen as an evolution of the much in demand radical thinker of the 1970s – he didn’t renounce his earlier work, but intellectually and spiritually – and to some extent physically – he was always on the move.

*Celebration of Awareness, Deschooling Society, Tools for Conviviality, Energy and Equity and Medical Nemesis*, subtitled *The Expropriation of Health*, these five books, all published in the first half of the 1970s, were the books that made him a global guru.

Among the key ideas which recur in these books are the questioning of commonly held views of ‘progress’, the argument that professions and institutions set up with the best of intentions tend to end up by becoming disabling rather than enabling, and that institutions and technologies tend to go through two watersheds, a first at which they become productive and a second at which they become counterproductive and turn from means into ends in themselves. He always preferred the old English word ‘tools’ to the Latinate ‘technology’ – ‘tools’ for him included hammers, highways and health-care systems as well as technology more narrowly defined.

Illich’s questioning of progress began as an analysis of the specific effects of schooling in Puerto Rico and this prompted his critique of the whole range of ideas, practices, and institutions implicated in the term ‘development’. He noticed how schools in Puerto Rico thwarted the very objective at which they ostensibly aim – equality of opportunity – by monopolizing education and pricing it out of the reach of the majority. In *Deschooling Society* he identified

schooling as the fundamental ritual of a consumer society. *Schole*, the Greek word from which ours derives, means leisure, and true learning, according to Illich, can only be the leisured pursuit of free people. The scope of the argument in *Deschooling Society* was broader than just the nature of schools. Illich didn't object to the existence of schools so long as they were recognized as privileged enclaves and did not monopolize public choice. He wanted to help bring about a society founded on a vision of freedom from envy and from addictive dependence on institutions. This was central to his broader critique of the model of 'development' promoted by the US and other governments. Illich saw 'development' as a 'war on subsistence' that would replace a tolerable absence of goods and services by a much more painful condition which he named 'modernized poverty'. Development, Illich argued, opens a vista onto 'an earthly paradise of never-ending consumption' but ends by generating needs that cannot be met and demands for services that can never be delivered. At the same time, the glamour that attaches to development dulls the dignity of subsistence and disables the pursuit of self-sufficiency.

Illich was conscious that schools grade and, in his eyes, they therefore degrade; and that schooling fosters the illusion that worthwhile learning depends on teaching. He argued that there is no intrinsic reason why the education that schools are now failing to provide could not be acquired more successfully in the setting of the family, of work and communal activity, in new kinds of libraries and other centres that would provide the means of learning. I think that we will see Illich's influence belatedly at work in the growth of personalising learning in secondary schools – with much greater emphasis on collaborative learning and student leadership.

But his criticisms of the medical profession were even fiercer than what he had to say about schooling. *Medical Nemesis* begins with the claim that 'The medical establishment has become a major threat to health'. The book explores the various ways in which the dominance of the medical profession disables its patients by undoing their courage and their capacity to heal, to suffer and to die. Clinical iatrogenesis, the harms and conditions originating with the doctor, are these days much discussed and understood. What Illich was concerned to draw attention to in the last two decades of his life – was social and, particularly cultural iatrogenesis – the fact, as he saw it, that people obsessively pursue medically defined images of health and increasingly believe that it is themselves that they are seeing in the distorting mirror of medical monitoring, screening and risk assessment. He wrote in *Medical Nemesis* that 'medical civilisation' tries to 'abolish the need for an art of suffering' and produces 'a progressive flattening out of personal, virtuous performance'. Modern medicine, Illich argued, saps the will of people to suffer their reality. So he warned against the dangers of the physician being put in charge of life from 'sperm to worm', as he put it. He argued that unrestrained medical treatment deprives suffering and death of their

meaning and undermines the cultural traditions that once allowed people to face them with dignity.

It is therefore relevant to say that – although he was not a fundamentalist about medicine – when a malignant tumour appeared on the side of his face, about 20 years before he died, he sought no orthodox medical treatment and controlled it as best he could through acupuncture and by smoking opium. Once when he was travelling by plane an oncologist was by chance seated next to him, and began to palpate the tumour without Illich's permission. It was as if, Illich joked subsequently, that he had come within the doctor's jurisdiction merely by appearing in public with an untreated condition. In the 1970s Illich pointed out that 'effective health care depends on self-care'; but by the end of his life he had radically revised even that view – by the 1990s responsibility for health had become what he called a 'rain dance': a way of warding off evil that at the same time domesticates it.

In both *Energy and Equity* and *Tools for Conviviality* Illich anticipated the unprecedented environmental crisis in which we now find ourselves. It is part of the reality of the twenty-first century that reducing carbon emissions from transport is one of the toughest nuts to crack in trying to meet the challenge of climate change. 35 years ago – long before there was any serious public discussion of global warming – Illich argued that 'High speed is the critical factor which makes transportation socially destructive. A true choice among political systems and of desirable social relations is possible only where speed is restrained. Participatory democracy demands low energy technology, and free people must travel the road to productive social relations at the speed of the bicycle'. That's from *Energy and Equity* (p24), in which he pointed out that if you factor in all the time that Americans spend every year on earning the money to pay for their car and to maintain it 'the model American [each year] puts in 1,600 hours to get 7,500 miles: less than five miles per hour' (p31). The more people use cars, the less useful cars become. Up to a certain speed and density automobiles may expand mobility, but beyond this threshold society becomes their prisoner. And he goes on to say (p37) that: 'Just as the demand for better health at all costs is a form of mental sickness, so is the pretence of higher speed'. No doubt he had the contrast between the bicycle and car partly in mind when he wrote in *Tools for Conviviality*: 'Tools foster conviviality to the extent to which they can be easily used, by anybody, as often or as seldom as desired for the accomplishment of a purpose chosen by the user. The use of such tools by one person does not restrain another from using them equally. They do not require previous certification of the user. Their existence does not impose any obligation to use them. They allow the user to express his meaning in action'.

The idea that Illich urgently wanted to establish in his books of the 1970s was that many contemporary institutions had reached, and were rapidly surpassing, a

threshold at which they would turn malignant and counterproductive. Beyond a certain size and intensity he argued in *Tools for Conviviality*, institutions begin to generate as many problems as they promise to solve. Illich was a scholar – principally an historian – and he observed the roots of the way institutions lose the purpose for which they were set up in the institutionalisation of charity in the 13th-century church. Indeed the Church was for Illich the prototype for all subsequent service bureaucracies.

That's a rather hasty tour of some of Illich's ideas from the 1970s and 1960s. It is worth noting that these counter-cultural ideas were first expressed by Illich in the 1960s but greatly expanded on in books and pamphlets in the 1970s. In 1983 he published a book called *Gender*, which while being essentially a work of history, was also a powerful critique of feminism in that he argued that the feminist pursuit of equality would produce new privileges for a minority of women and new disadvantages for the majority. To do full justice to his book *Gender* would need a talk on its own – most of the reviews were hostile and Illich was sharply attacked by feminists and others for being a reactionary and a romantic. It marked the end of the period in which Illich was in great demand as a charismatic lecturer and teacher.

Illich's work in the 1960s and 1970s was a call to institutional revolution – as David Cayley put it 'he outlined the marriage of playfulness, austerity and the sense of scale that he felt would be necessary to counteract the prevailing technomania and institutional hubris' (David Cayley, *The Rivers North of the Future*, p16). But Illich's hopes in the 1960s and 1970s were not realized, and we are still faced with the fact that we have the technology of the Gods and the politics of children. And this brings me to a consideration of ideas to which Illich gave particular emphasis in the last period of his life, a period in which he was often in acute physical pain, his books were no longer published by mainstream publishers, he earned his living in the margins of a number of universities, and he managed to persuade the US Inland Revenue that a certain number of cases of ordinary but decent wine were his major teaching tool and could, therefore, be written off from taxes.

From the start of his priesthood Illich had distinguished two forms of the Church, which he called the Church as *she* and the Church as *it*. To the first, the Church as the repository of tradition and the living embodiment of Christian community, he was, and always remained, deeply committed. The Church, in this sense, he said is 'that surprise in the net, the pearl...the mystery, the kingdom among us'. But to the second, the Church as a self-serving worldly power he was always a pretty sharp thorn. Illich regarded the modern west as a perversion, indeed a betrayal of Christian faith. He frequently cited the old Latin phrase – *Corruptio optimi quae est pessima* – the corruption of the best is the worst, or in other words, the depth to which we have fallen is the measure of

the height to which we were called. For Illich the Church became less and less capable of discerning its own tendency to substitute power for faith, and more and more bent on a comprehensive regulation of Christian life. And what began in the Church was gradually built into the unconscious foundations – the certainties, as Illich says – of the modern world. So he criticised the church for its inability to recognise the crucial difference between charity – always an individual vocation, a personal call, the charity of the good Samaritan – and its institutional counterfeits. At the same time he was a realist about institutionalisation as such – he recognised that people are not angels and can't live without institutional routine. He regarded the institutionalisation of charity, if not as an inevitable process, then at least as an entirely and understandably human one.

In the book created from interviews with David Cayley, *The Rivers North of the Future*, which was published posthumously in Canada in 2005, Illich elucidates on this central idea of his – that the modern west is a betrayal of Christian faith. He also expands on his view that since the 1980s society has been incorporated into a world of systems – that the computer had replaced the book as the root metaphor of the age – and that the moment of collective decision making may have passed; this gives a new emphasis to what I take to be a mainstream Christian belief in our 'radical powerlessness'. But, no less importantly, he argues that for him 'friendship has been the source, condition and context for the possible coming about of commitment and like-mindedness', in effect the search for truth depends on the cultivation of 'an open group of people who are moved by fidelity to each other as persons and dare to maintain fidelity even if the other one becomes a heavy burden'.

To recap on these three of Illich's ideas – and I hope that I am not caricaturing them: the institutionalising of charity has inadvertently resulted in a betrayal of Christian faith. In the last 30 years we've been through a terrifying change – the incorporation of our lives into a world of systems that cannot effectively be controlled – but that friendship is a pre-condition for the search for truth and the search for truth must continue even while recognising our 'radical powerlessness'.

I want to end with a brief reflection on Ivan Illich and human caused climate change. In the 1970s Illich was acutely aware of environmental degradation and was one of the first effectively to point out that energy policy should not be separated from social justice – energy and equity go together. By 1990 he had become genuinely horrified at the contemporary world. In a lecture in Hanover in that year he said: 'I can imagine no complex of controls capable of saving us from the flood of poisons, radiations, goods and services which sicken humans and animals more than ever before. There is no way out of this world. I live in a manufactured reality ever further removed from creation. And I know today

what that signifies, what horror threatens each of us. A few decades ago, I did not yet know it. At that time, it seemed possible that I could share responsibility for the re-making of this manufactured world. Today I finally know what powerlessness is. 'Responsibility' is now an illusion'.

I think that Illich is too depressed at this point, too negative. I don't believe that 'responsibility is an illusion'. Last night in Southwark Cathedral Rowan Williams told his audience that people should use the climate change crisis as an opportunity to become human again, setting aside the addictive and self-destructive behaviour that has damaged our souls. This is what the Archbishop of Canterbury said: 'Many of the things which have moved us towards ecological disaster have been distortions of who and what we are and their overall effect has been to isolate us from the reality we're part of. Our response to this crisis needs to be, in the most basic sense, a reality check'. Rowan Williams added: 'We need to keep up pressure on national governments; there are questions only they can answer about the investment of national resources. We need equally to keep up pressure on ourselves and to learn how to work better as civic agents'.

Climate change is an urgent issue and Illich would have categorised climate change as an evil, not a problem. 'We can suffer such evil', he says, 'we can be broken by it, but we cannot make sense of it, cannot direct it'. However as somebody who always tried to think and to live his Christian faith in the thick of modern ideas and institutions, I wonder how he would have responded to Rowan Williams' lecture and to the statement recently published by the Religious Society of Friends (the Quakers) that *The crisis of global climate change represents a supreme test of humanity's collective wisdom and courage*. I imagine that he would have warned us against succumbing to 'rain dances', trying to ward off evil while at the same time trying to domesticate it. But he did leave us with some more positive guidance. Having lived a life of relentless questioning and intellectual curiosity and having stressed the importance of 'tools for conviviality', Illich suggested at the end of his life that the best way to live our lives was through 'courageous, disciplined and critical renunciation accomplished in community'.

I am very pleased to have had this opportunity to rediscover Illich and to share this rediscovery with you. Most of his books are still in print and most err on the side of brevity. In one of his interviews he said 'I have no expectations from technology, but I believe in the beauty, in the creativity, in the surprising inventiveness of people, and I continue to hope in them'.

RH

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