



INTERVIEW

Ivan Illich – Paradigmatic Critical Thinker for a New World

World-leading authority on Ivan Illich, **David Cayley**,
is interviewed by Richard House

Richard House [RH]: David, welcome to our journal, and its special theme issue on the late, great Ivan Illich. When I realised that 2022 was an important anniversary for the great man and enthusiastically decided to right the comparative neglect of his huge cultural contributions in our journal, I quickly came across your wonderful writings on Ivan and his legacy (e.g. Cayley, 1992, 2021 – reviewed elsewhere in this issue). I'm thrilled to be doing this interview with you – thank you! Perhaps we could begin by you sharing with our readers how you first became aware of, and interested in, Ivan Illich's work.

David Cayley [DC]: I first heard of Ivan Illich in the late summer of 1968 when I was sent a copy of a talk he had given earlier that year to a group of CIASP (Conference on Inter-American Student Projects) volunteers in Chicago. Illich published that talk, in a book called *The Church, Change and Development*, as 'Yankee go home: the American do-gooder in Latin America', but it circulates on the Internet to this day under the title 'To hell with good intentions', which summarizes pretty well what Illich had to say to these youngsters. Search your souls, he

said, and ask yourselves, what is it that qualifies young Americans to descend on Mexico as helpers? I was sent this paper by CUSO (the Canadian University Service Overseas), another volunteer organization in whose service I had just spent two years as a school-teacher in a Chinese village in Sarawak in northern Borneo.

It would be untrue to say that I had signed up for this adventure out of any great idealism about 'international development' – I was too innocently unpolitical at age 20 for that; but the experience had left me quizzical and unsettled just the same, and Illich's sermon to the CIASP volunteers made more sense to me than anything else I was hearing at the time.

The school system in Malaysia, of which Sarawak is a province, was then an extremely steep pyramid, focusing aspiration on overseas universities which only a handful could attend. Illich was the first to point out to me the futility – his word – of this 'system for creating dropouts'. I took his critique of development seriously, and found an opportunity to visit his Center for Intercultural Documentation (CIDOC) in

Cuernavaca the following summer. The next year, in 1970, some friends and I put on a teach-in at the University of Toronto called ‘Crisis in Development’, at which Illich was our featured speaker. At that time, I could not have imagined the relationship we would have later, but that was how it began.

RH: Thank you, David. I’m currently immersed in reading your two wonderful books on the great man and his life’s work, and so many questions to ask you are coming to me, that I’ll have to contain myself to make this interview of manageable length!

Let’s pursue ‘the development question’ for a moment, if I may call it that. One of the many things I adore about Illich is the way he has the capacity to question the erstwhile unquestionable (and, often, ‘the politically correct’) – and yet not from a kind of contrarian cussedness, but from a brilliantly penetrating mind that can see straight through taken-for-granted non-sense for what it is.

Can you say something about whether Illich’s critical views on development gained any purchase in either the academic or the policy-oriented world at the time, and whether there exists any trace of his counter-intuitive views and their influence in development thinking today?

Certainly, I studied a whole module on ‘The Geography of Economic Development’ at Oxford in 1974–5 – and, very sadly but perhaps unsurprisingly, Illich’s name was never mentioned.

DC: Your question doesn’t have a simple answer, since one could truthfully say either that Illich’s critique of development failed or that it succeeded, depending on one’s point of

view; and this would be true of *all* of Illich’s critiques, not just that of development. The fact that Illich’s name wasn’t even mentioned in your module on the economic geography of development in 1974–5 indicates the extent of his failure. Illich was immensely popular in those years as an author and lecturer, but I don’t think he ever got far within the profession of development economics, nor in the political circles where decisions were actually made about how much development assistance would be sent where, and on what terms. The same could be said of the ‘medical establishment’ to whom he directed attention in *Medical Nemesis*, or the educational establishment whose disestablishment he called for in *Deschooling Society*.

On the other hand, it could be said that when Illich and some like-minded colleagues gathered in the late 1980s to compose an ‘epilogue’, as they said, for the age of development, they could quite plausibly claim that this age was indeed over. (The meetings I’m referring to produced *The Development Dictionary* in 1992.) Illich, of course, was not the only critic of development, but he was certainly part of the movement that changed the valence of the word ‘development’ in the years between the 1960s – the United Nations ‘Development Decade’ – and the publication of *The Development Dictionary* (Sachs, 1992).

Again and again, Illich tried to convince his readers and listeners that the Western world was at a decisive turning-point – a moment at which it would either reform and abandon the path of endless growth in goods and services, or it would descend into a condition of total artificiality and permanent paralysis; these options are set out most starkly in his *Tools for Conviviality*. Clearly, his and many

others' call for reform went unheeded; but neither did the unreformed world retain its innocent attachment to ideals like development and education. A certain cynicism set in with the 'counter-productivity' and disorientation that Illich predicted. Peoples pursued 'development' as they could, without any longer believing that all were set on the same path and would proceed through the same stages to the same shining city. Arguably, we still live in this aftermath – still bent on progress without any longer believing in progress.

Illich's 'reception history' is complicated, and my answer here barely scratches its surface, but I do think it's fruitful to go back and ask what the nature and substance were of Illich's critique of development. Parts of what he said were taken up – in the attack on 'master narratives' that followed the publication of Lyotard's *The Post-Modern Condition*, for example. Other parts – his connecting development with Christianity's compulsion to 'bring in the other' – remain almost unremarked. That's the situation today as I see it.

RH: This richest of answers leaves me wishing to go in many directions – thank you! What a pleasant surprise to see your linking of Illich to the 'postmodern' critique of master-narratives! I have a strong sense of Illich being, in some respects at least, a quintessentially post-modern figure (which is, importantly, different from being 'a post-modernist' per se) – for example, always threatening to take his reader by surprise, and even to unsettle her; not able to be pigeon-holed or predictable in any systematising way; being a faithful champion of diversity as opposed to mono-culturalism – and so on. Yet in your recent book, I was fascinated to read

that 'Illich came to the conclusion that "postmodernism is incredibly disembodied" and, for that reason, denounced it unequivocally' (2021, p. 251).

This might suggest that Illich did have some kind of dalliance with postmodernism – as many have done, of course (he was certainly aware of Lyotard, Foucault and Bachelard, for example), but ultimately rejected it as a project with which to be publicly aligned. Would this be a correct characterisation? Perhaps somewhat mischievously, I wonder whether he might be the consummate 'postmodern' figure, in the sense of also critically deconstructing 'postmodernism' itself!

Later I'd like us to dive deeply into Illich's rich oeuvre of ideas, writings and contributions to modern culture. But first, and as a backdrop to this exploration, a distinctively Illichean theme is that of 'disabling professions' – a subject that is especially relevant to the professionalisation and credentialisation of psychotherapy and counselling – practices that are often written about in this journal. In a book I co-edited in 1997 (House & Totton, 1997), I favourably quoted Illich thus: 'The Post-Professional Ethos will hopefully result in a social panorama more colourful and diverse than all the cultures of past and present taken together' (Illich & others, 1977, p. 39). I found this to be a glorious counterblast to the toxic and disabling Audit Culture (Power, 1994, 1997) when I first read it.

You devote a whole chapter (Chapter 6) to 'Disabling Professions' in your 2021 book. Can you say something about how Illich's notion of 'disabling professions' sits within the whole corpus of his writings and ideas?

For example, is it a relatively autonomous idea, or is it a notion that is woven through, and in some sense intrinsic to, his whole oeuvre?

DC: There's more than one question in your response, but, for now, I'll just try to answer the last one. Yes, I would say emphatically that Illich's critique of 'disabling professions' is not just intrinsic to his work as a whole but central to it. To put it very bluntly, Illich's whole project concerned a misunderstanding of the nature of the church, or perhaps better, a confusion between the church's two natures. From the day he recognized that his encounter with mass compulsory schooling, in Puerto Rico in the 1950s, had put him in a context that was 'ridiculously similar to a religious one', to his remark to me, near the end of his life, that 'modernity can be studied as an extension of church history', he was taken up by the difference between what he once called 'the Church as She and the Church as It' – the former being the mysterious society that comes into being 'whenever two or three are gathered together in my name'; the latter being the worldly power which is subject to the same social dynamics as any other worldly institution. Mistaking the one for the other – i.e. assuming that 'Christian vocation' could be 'institutionalized, legitimized, and managed' – was what he called the 'corruptio optima pessima' – the transformation of the best into the worst, the plunge from 'the world's... mysterious vocation to glory' to the 'demonic night' that now 'envelops our world'.

It was not that Illich thought there was any way that the church could have avoided becoming a worldly institution, as if the Gospel could have been transmitted angelically from generation to generation –

that he is generically and romantically 'anti-institutional' is a common misunderstanding of his work; but he did believe it was possible to 'know the difference' and to refrain from 'confusing salvation with the Church', as he said in *Deschooling Society*. This understanding carried over into his analysis of the supposedly secular institutions that he wrote about in the 1970s.

Illich thought that the institutions of education, medicine and transportation, about which he wrote in detail, and others which were included by implication and extension, were exceeding a crucial threshold, and becoming, as he said, counterproductive. In the process, they were beginning to encroach more and more upon people's freedom – their freedom, you might say, since I have already introduced this problematic word, to work out their own salvation. Illich called this sphere 'the vernacular', and tried, quite unsuccessfully, to introduce the term into sociology as a name for what remained, or what was regrowing, of a world in which people could speak and learn, be born and die, grieve and celebrate free of professional tutelage. He predicted in the 1970s that if professional hegemonies were not restrained, this realm of freedom would be engulfed. I believe that this has largely happened, though not without resistance. What began in the church has been completed by its modern descendants.

It's also worth pointing out that Illich's critique of disabling professions is at the heart of what is most novel, and I think most helpful, in his political analysis. Whether it's the 'checks and balances' of the tripartite governing structure of the United States, or the 'mixed constitution' in place in Britain and many of its former colonies, modern

democracies are based on the idea of controlling power by dividing it. Illich claimed that in the society of ‘services’, a collapse of powers had occurred, and professionals had begun to combine executive, judicial and legislative powers in one agency.

If Carl Schmitt is right that sovereignty consists in the capacity to ‘decide on the exception’ – declare an emergency in which normal rules, rights and restraints no longer apply – then I think it is evident that what Illich called ‘dominant professions’ – professions that have been able to make their once optional services compulsory – have sucked much of the authority once residing in courts, legislatures and governments into their own hands. I’ve argued this at length in the chapter you mentioned, and I won’t attempt to demonstrate it here; but I do think Illich has shown that the actual constitution of countries like ours is dramatically different from their formal constitutions – a point with extensive political ramifications.

RH: That’s fascinating, David. The fact that Illich’s oeuvre speaks to and connects with such huge themes as sovereignty and the constitutional make-up of the nation-state is, I think, one key reason why his writings had – and still have – such wide-ranging appeal and relevance today. And your own work has helped me to understand how crucial it is to locate Illich’s ideas in relation to his engagement with the church – something one wouldn’t necessarily pick up in reading one of his classic critical texts....

...David, our interview was interrupted and, alas, we have regrettably had to curtail it somewhat at this point. But in salvaging something useful and important from the experience, can I ask you this final question:

‘In the context of our interview having been curtailed, can I ask you to finish the piece with anything you feel moved to say about the great Ivan Illich – whether it be related to our interview to date, and/or anything more general you would like to finish by saying.’

DC: Right off the top of my head, your invitation to say whatever I want in conclusion makes me want to talk a little more about two subjects that we’ve already considered. Both are aspects of Illich’s works that seem to me indispensable, if there’s to be any reformation of our disintegrating culture.

The first is his insistence that the history of the West, and its world-wide sequel, is best summed up in the old saw: the corruption of the best is the worst. This is a novel hypothesis, as philosopher Charles Taylor points out in his preface to *The Rivers North of the Future*, my book with Illich on this subject. Many have written for and against Christianity; many have seen Christianity as simultaneously preserved and transformed via secularization; but Illich’s view of our time as the perversion, or misunderstanding, of the Gospel is unique among theorists of modernity. This strikes me as important in several ways. First it invites us out of the trap of conceiving our world as post-Christian, when it’s actually, Illich says, the ‘most obviously Christian epoch’. This in turn opens a new perspective on contemporary institutions. It also suggests that our primary problem is ‘religious’ – not in the sense that we need a new or refurbished religion, but rather that we need at last to understand religion as a ‘yoke’, in Karl Barth’s word – something inescapably part of our nature. Then it might begin to be possible to begin to reflect on the explosive consequences of turning Christ’s overcoming of religion into a new religion. Finally it encourages attention

to the past in search of what John Milbank quite wonderfully calls ‘the unknown future that mankind has missed and must seek to rejoin’.

The second thing I’d like to emphasize in closing is Illich’s account of the disabling of popular judgement via professionalization and, more recently, via the full-blown technocracy that he predicted in *Tools for Conviviality* and which emerged in hegemonic form during the Covid-19 schemozzle. Professional hegemony creates popular incompetence, and then cites it as justification for further controls. Practical judgement loses all confidence and all purchase on our affairs. Illich’s prescription for ‘conviviality’ – recover the power of original, unmanipulated speech and puncture the mystique of science – remains as pertinent as ever.

I do not see how a political and civic life can be reconstructed without people who know where their feet are planted and what they are saying when they speak.

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