



Book Review from the Archive¹

***Medical Nemesis* by Ivan Illich, Calder & Boyars, 1974, £1.25 [in 1975]**

Reviewed by **Vivian Milroy** [1917–2009]

S&S's Founding Editor in 1973

Editor's note: I was thrilled to find this review in the S&S archive, penned by our legendary founding-editor, Vivian Milroy. Written nearly half a century ago, some might say that the final sentence of his review, below, is hugely poignant and prescient when read nearly 50 years later, in 2024.

Eysenck pointed out that the probability of 'cure' in mental illness was the same for patients who had had psychiatric treatment as it was for those who had not. He received a great deal of obloquy [*sic.*] and defensive anger from the psychiatrists.

Illich now does the same thing for conventional medicine. He points out that the decrease in epidemic deaths from cholera, tuberculosis and diphtheria all pre-dated the discovery of specific remedies for these diseases and would have been self-regulating without the intervention of 'scientific' medicine. Moreover, he points out that in spite of all the spectacular advances in technical equipment and identification of diseases, the expectation of life is completely unchanged, and the common cold remains uncured.

This in itself is bad enough. What it means is that resources are being directed to the enhancement of the medical profession, which is thereby encouraged to proliferate its production of gimmick apparatus and cures at the expense of starving millions. The one sure how to deal with and experience their pain. The commercial medical machine thinks only in terms of 'pain-killing', and has produced the monstrously expanding drug industry –

correlate is that between ill-health and malnutrition.

More important, perhaps, is the effect of a bureaucratised and commercialised medical system on the social factors of community and caring. Non-technological societies, Illich points out, deal effectively and understandingly with the problems of disease, aging and death. A warm human relationship can inform these inevitable events, whereas in our industrial and commercial culture, disease and the processes of dying alienate the individual from his friends and relations, and turn him into an impersonal cog in a bureaucratic medical machine.

Moreover, the elevation of the medical profession into a religious elite means that anyone suffering from an illness, however trivial, will tend to adjust his symptoms to this medical model. A stomach-ache, for example, is not something to be dealt with and experienced by the individual: it is a free pass into the medical machine. Pain, Illich suggests, is a necessary component of human life, and all cultures in the past have learned one of the effects of which is enormously to increase diseases caused as accidental side-effects. The pinnacle of this is the use of pre-

frontal lobotomy to produce an anaesthetised zombie who feels neither pain, nor humanity.

It is, one might say, very easy to criticise; but what could one do about this? Probably nothing. Such is the insidious power of the organised medical profession that any attempt to lessen their influence would be very quickly stifled.

In fact, Illich says,

the skills needed for the application of the most generally used diagnostic and therapeutic aids are so simple that the careful observation of instructions by people who personally care would probably guarantee more effective and responsible use than medical practice ever could. Most of what remains could probably be handled better by ‘barefoot’ non-professional amateurs with deep personal concern than by professional physicians, psychiatrists, dentists, midwives, physiotherapists or oculists.

In view of the probability that Western industrial society is about to break down completely, this is an encouraging and hopeful thought. What is less encouraging and less hopeful is that it would probably need the complete break-down of our society before such a simple truth could be put into effect.

V.M.

Note

- 1 This review appeared in *Self & Society*, 3 (2), 1975, pp. 29–30 (lightly copy-edited here; RH).