

Ivan Illich (4 September 1926 – 2 December 2002) was an Austrian [philosopher](#), [Roman Catholic](#) priest, and "maverick social critic" of the institutions of contemporary [Western culture](#) and their effects on the provenance and practice of education, medicine, work, energy use, transportation, and economic development.

Illich was born in Vienna to a [Croatian](#) Catholic father, engineer Ivan Peter Illich, and a [Sephardic Jewish](#) mother, Ellen née Regenstreif-Ortlieb.^[3] His maternal grandmother was from [Texas](#).^[4] Illich had Italian, Spanish, French, and German as native languages.^{[5][6][7]} He later learned [Croatian](#), the language of his grandfathers, then Ancient Greek and Latin, in addition to Portuguese, Hindi, English, and other languages.^[5] He studied [histology](#) and [crystallography](#) at the [University of Florence](#) (Italy) as well as [theology](#) and [philosophy](#) at the [Pontifical Gregorian University](#) in [Rome](#) (from 1942 to 1946), and medieval history in [Salzburg](#).^[5]

He wrote a dissertation focusing on the historian [Arnold J. Toynbee](#) and would return to that subject in his later years. In 1951, he "signed up to become a parish priest in one of New York's poorest neighborhoods—[Washington Heights](#), on the northern tip of Manhattan, then a barrio of fresh-off-the-airplane [Puerto Rican immigrants](#)."^[2] In 1956, at the age of 30, he was appointed as the vice rector of the [Catholic University of Puerto Rico](#), "a position he managed to keep for several years before getting thrown out—Illich was just a little too loud in his criticism of the Vatican's pronouncements on [birth control](#) and comparatively demure silence about [the bomb](#)."^[2] It was in [Puerto Rico](#) that Illich met [Everett Reimer](#) and the two began to analyze their own functions as "educational" leaders. In 1959, he traveled throughout South America on foot and by bus.^[5]

In 1961, Illich founded the [Centro Intercultural de Documentación](#) (CIDOC, or Intercultural Documentation Center) at [Cuernavaca](#) in Mexico, ostensibly a research center offering language courses to missionaries from North America and volunteers of the [Alliance for Progress](#) program^[5] initiated by [John F. Kennedy](#). His real intent was to document the participation of the Vatican in the "modern development" of the so-called [Third World](#). Illich looked askance at the liberal pity or conservative imperiousness that motivated the rising tide of global industrial development. He viewed such emissaries as a form of industrial hegemony and, as such, an act of "war on subsistence." He sought to teach missionaries dispatched by the Church not to impose their own cultural values^[8] and to identify themselves instead as guests of the host country.^[citation needed] "Throughout the late '60s and early '70s, CIDOC was part language school and part free university for intellectual [hippies](#) from all over the Americas."^[2]

At the CIDOC, "Illich was able to develop his potent and highly influential critique of Third World development schemes and their fresh-faced agents: Kennedy's Alliance for Progress, the [Peace Corps](#), and countless other missionary efforts bankrolled and organized by wealthy nations, foundations, and religious groups."^[2] After ten years, critical analysis from the CIDOC of the institutional actions by the Church brought the organization into conflict with the Vatican. Unpopular with the local chapter of [Opus Dei](#),^[2] Illich was called to Rome for questioning, due in part to a [CIA](#) report.^[5] In 1976, Illich, apparently concerned by the influx of formal academics and the potential side effects of its own "institutionalization," shut the center down with consent from the other members of the CIDOC. Several of the members subsequently continued language schools in Cuernavaca, of which some still exist. Illich himself resigned from the active

priesthood in the late 1960s (having attained the rank of [monsignor](#)), but continued to identify as a priest and occasionally performed private [masses](#).

In the 1970s, Illich was popular among leftist intellectuals in France, his thesis having been discussed in particular by [André Gorz](#). However, his influence declined after the [1981 election](#) of [François Mitterrand](#) as Illich was considered too pessimistic at a time when the [French Left](#) took control of the government.^[5]

In the 1980s and beyond, Illich traveled extensively, mainly splitting his time between the United States, Mexico, and Germany. He held an appointment as a Visiting Professor of Philosophy, Science, Technology and Society at [Penn State](#). He also taught at the [University of Bremen](#) and [University of Hagen](#).^[9] During his last days of his life he admitted that he was greatly influenced by one of the Indian economists and adviser to M.K. Gandhi, [J.C. Kumarappa](#), most notably, his book, *Economy of Permanence*.^[10]

Deschooling Society

Main article: [Deschooling Society](#)

The book that brought Ivan Illich to public attention was *Deschooling Society* (1971), a radical critical discourse on education as practised in "modern" economies. Giving examples of what he regards as the ineffectual nature of institutionalized education, Illich posited self-directed education, supported by intentional social relations, in fluid informal arrangements:

Universal education through schooling is not feasible. It would be no more feasible if it were attempted by means of alternative institutions built on the style of present schools. Neither new attitudes of teachers toward their pupils nor the proliferation of educational hardware or software (in classroom or bedroom), nor finally the attempt to expand the pedagogue's responsibility until it engulfs his pupils' lifetimes will deliver universal education. The current search for new educational *funnels* must be reversed into the search for their institutional inverse: educational *webs* which heighten the opportunity for each one to transform each moment of his living into one of learning, sharing, and caring. We hope to contribute concepts needed by those who conduct such counterfoil research on education--and also to those who seek alternatives to other established service industries.

— *Ivan Illich*^[11]

The last sentence makes clear what the title suggests—that the institutionalization of education tends towards the institutionalization of society and that ideas for de-institutionalizing education may be a starting point for a de-institutionalized society.

The book is more than a critique—it contains suggestions for a reinvention of learning throughout society and lifetime. Particularly striking is his call (in 1971) for the use of advanced technology to support "learning webs."

The operation of a peer-matching network would be simple. The user would identify himself by name and address and describe the activity for which he sought a peer. A computer would send him back the names and addresses of all those who had inserted

the same description. It is amazing that such a simple utility has never been used on a broad scale for publicly valued activity.

— *Ivan Illich*

According to a contemporary review in *The Libertarian Forum*, "Illich's advocacy of the [free market](#) in education is the bone in the throat that is choking the public educators."^[12] Although it is important to note that Illich's opposition was not merely to publicly funded schooling, as with the libertarians, but to schooling as such; the disestablishment of schools was for him not a means to a free market in educational services, but a deschooled society, which was a more fundamental shift. As he later asserted in *After Deschooling, What?* (1973): 'We can disestablish schools, or we can deschool culture'.^[13] He actually opposed advocates of free-market education as "the most dangerous category of educational reformers."^[14]

Tools for Conviviality

Tools for Conviviality (1973) was published only two years after *Deschooling Society*. In this new work Illich generalized the themes that he had previously applied to the field of education: the institutionalization of specialized knowledge, the dominant role of [technocratic](#) elites in industrial society, and the need to develop new instruments for the reconquest of practical knowledge by the average citizen. He wrote that "[e]lite professional groups . . . have come to exert a 'radical [monopoly](#)' on such basic human activities as health, agriculture, home-building, and learning, leading to a 'war on subsistence' that robs peasant societies of their vital skills and know-how. The result of much economic development is very often not human flourishing but 'modernized poverty,' dependency, and an out-of-control system in which the humans become worn-down mechanical parts."^[2] Illich proposed that we should "invert the present deep structure of tools" in order to "give people tools that guarantee their right to work with independent efficiency."^[15]

Tools for Conviviality attracted worldwide attention. A résumé of it was published by French social philosopher [André Gorz](#) in *Les Temps Modernes*, under the title "Freeing the Future."^[16] The book's vision of tools that would be developed and maintained by a community of users had a significant influence on the first developers of the [personal computer](#), notably [Lee Felsenstein](#).^[17]

Medical Nemesis

In his *Medical Nemesis*, first published in 1975, also known as *Limits to Medicine*, Illich subjected contemporary Western medicine to detailed attack. He argued that the [medicalization](#) in recent decades of so many of life's vicissitudes—birth and death, for example—frequently caused more harm than good and rendered many people in effect lifelong patients. He marshalled a body of statistics to show what he considered the shocking extent of post-operative side-effects and drug-induced illness in advanced industrial society. He introduced to a wider public the notion of [iatrogenic disease](#),^[18] which had been scientifically established a century earlier by British nurse [Florence Nightingale](#) (1820–1910). Others have since voiced similar views.^[19]

Concepts

Counterproductivity

The main notion of Ivan Illich is the concept of counterproductivity: when institutions of modern industrial society impede their purported aims. For example, Ivan Illich calculated that, in America in the 1970s, if you add the time spent to work to earn the money to buy a car, the time spent in the car (including traffic jam), the time spent in the health care industry because of a car crash, the time spent in the oil industry to fuel cars ...etc., and you divide the number of kilometres traveled per year by that, you obtain the following calculation: 10000 km per year per person divided by 1600 hours per year per American equals 6 km per hour. So the real speed of a car would be about 3.7 miles per hour.

Specific diseconomy

Specific diseconomy is another term Illich used, as a measure of the degree of institutional counterproductivity that is occurring—referring to the exact degree to which, for example, the medical industry induces illness, educational institutions induce ignorance, the judicial system perpetuates injustice, or national defense may make a nation less secure. When specific diseconomy is on the increase, this means an institution or industry is increasingly counterproductive to its original intentions.

Radical monopoly

He invented the concept of radical monopoly: when a technical medium is or appears to be more effective, it creates a monopoly which denies access to other media. The mandatory consumption of a medium which uses a lot of energy (for example motorised transportation) narrows the fruition of use value (innate transit ability).

By "radical monopoly" I mean the dominance of one type of product rather than the dominance of one brand. I speak about radical monopoly when one industrial production process exercises an exclusive control over the satisfaction of a pressing need, and excludes nonindustrial activities from competition.

— *Ivan Illich*, [\[20\]](#)

Conviviality

Illich worked to open new possibilities. Illich devotes a chapter of *Deschooling Society* to the proposal to the *Rebirth of Epimethean Man*.^[21] He argued that we need convivial tools as opposed to machines. A tool may have many applications, some very different from its original intended use. A tool may be thought of as an expression of its user. The opposite of this is the machine, where humans become its servants, their role consisting only of running the machine for a single purpose.

I choose the term "conviviality" to designate the opposite of industrial productivity. I intend it to mean autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment; and this in contrast with the conditioned response of persons to the demands made upon them by others, and by a man-made environment. I consider conviviality to be individual freedom realized in personal interdependence and, as such, an intrinsic ethical value. I believe that, in any society, as

conviviality is reduced below a certain level, no amount of industrial productivity can effectively satisfy the needs it creates among society's members.

— *Ivan Illich*, [\[22\]](#)