**Ivan Illich: Convivial Tools**

**Who was Ivan Illich?**

Born in Vienna in 1926, Ivan Illich was the son of an engineer father from Dalmatia, who owned property there, and a Jewish (later converted) mother who came from a wealthy industrial family. Illich was well-educated, having completed high school in Florence and studied medieval history, theology, and philosophy. In 1951, he became a Catholic priest in Rome. A polyglot, he spoke more than 10 languages. In 1951, he went to the United States for postdoctoral studies at Princeton but returned to become a priest in Washington Heights, at that time a barrio of newly-arrived Puerto Rican immigrants. In 1956, he became vice-rector of the University of Puerto Rico. In 1960, he was expelled after speaking out in favor of birth control, divorce, and the atomic bomb. He also traveled through South America by foot and bus, reflecting on his role as an educational leader.

Following his departure from Puerto Rico, Illich moved to Cuernavaca, Mexico, where he founded the Center of Intercultural Formation (CIF) in 1961. The CIF later became the Centro Intercultural de Documentación (CIDOC, or Intercultural Documentation Center), originally established as a missionary training center. Around 1971, Illich renounced the active priesthood. In 1976, CIDOC was shut down. In the 1980s, he worked in teaching positions between the U.S. and Germany, influenced by Indian economist and adviser to M. K. Gandhi, J. C. Kumarappa, and his book *Economy of Permanence*. Illich was closely associated with major figures in left-anarchist circles, notably Paul Goodman and unschooling advocate John Holt. He was deeply rooted in respect for communities and their traditions.

**Resume/Questions**

**What are the first and second watershed events?**

**First:**

* **Medicine (1913):** The first watershed, which marked the advent of effective medical treatments for standard diseases, germ-free water, aspirin, soap, and toothbrushes.
* **Transportation:** Travel by rail.

**Second:**

* **Medicine (mid-1950s):** The second watershed, when medicine itself created a new kind of disease. The cost of healing became dwarfed by the cost of extending life, and sickness was institutionalized. A system of certifications and bureaucracy emerged.
* **Monopoly of medical expression:** Exclusion of mothers, aunts, and other non-professionals from medical care. There were also new demands for medical services. Illich suggests that this is not necessarily an "either-or" situation but that more self-determination is possible (see also the barefoot doctor system in 1960s/70s China under Mao).
* **Transportation:** Vehicles created ever greater distances, primarily for the sake of traffic, leading to the elimination of deliberate decision-making. In some regions, it became impossible to walk to the beach anymore.

On a worldwide scale, but particularly in the USA, medical care became focused on breeding a human stock fit only for domesticated life within an increasingly costly, man-made, and scientifically controlled environment. (p. 17)

**What are convivial tools?**

'tool' broadly enough to include not only simple hardware such as drills, pots, syringes, brooms, building elements, or motors, and not just large machines like cars or power stations; I also include among tools productive institutions such as factories that produce tangible commodities like corn flakes or electric current, and productive systems for intangible commodities such as those which produce 'education,' 'health,' 'knowledge,' or 'decisions'. (p.34)

* Distributive and participatory (p. 26)
* Support a variety of forms of governance and federation (p. 30), with each community having its unique arrangements (p. 27), promoting pluralism (p. 29).
* Rule out certain levels of power, compulsion, and programming (p. 30).
* Enrich the environment.
* Not artificially restricted, like today’s libraries or laboratories (does this apply to online libraries? In Austria, students pay 10 euros a year for access).
* Structurally, the telephone: "The telephone lets people say what they want"—but is this still true in an age of total surveillance?
* Power drills, mechanized pushcarts.
* Convivial tools for self-initiated learning (p. 78).
* Paper, pencil, typewriter, modern copying devices, tape recorders, cameras: All convivial as long as they are in the hands of the people (see tactical media).
* Convivial tools are creative, unpredictable, and lively, not as trivial and planned as, for example, the new iPhone.
* Independent efficiency.
* Right to work (instead of merely being consumers) (p. 23).
* Tools to move and dwell (p. 23).
* Austerity/limits are necessary.
* Against manipulation/at least controlled by others (33)

**What is convivial politics?**

Illich chose the term "conviviality" to designate the opposite of industrial productivity. He intended it to mean autonomous and creative interaction among people, as well as between people and their environment (p. 24).

“A convivial society would be the result of social arrangements that guarantee for each member the most ample and free access to the tools of the community, limiting this freedom only to ensure another member’s equal freedom” (p. 25).

In general, Illich argues against technocrats, power holders, and experts but does not rule out certain traditional forms of governance.

He writes: "The adoption of a convivial mode of production does not of itself mean that one specific form of government would be more fitting than another, nor does it rule out a world federation, or agreements between nation-states, or communes, or many of the most traditional forms of governance. I restrict myself to the description of basic structural criteria within which the retooling of society can be achieved" (p. 30).

Wthat is the Multiple Balance  
First, Illich argues that in an industrial society one can observe the shift from goods to services (i.e. something that with the platformization can be seen. Out of balance it that every crisis is rendered “repairable” trough more technology, more science, more date, and “further social disintegration” (61), Illich characterizes 6 parameters that threaten life

* 1. **overgrowth (threatens environment) – Biologial Degradation**
  2. **industrialization (threatens convivial work) – Radical Monopoly**

Radical monopoly imposes compulsory consumption and thereby restricts personal autonomy. It constitutes a special kind of social control because it is enforced by means of the imposed consumption of a standard product that only large institutions can provide. (p.67)

* 1. **overprogramming (threatens creativity) – Overprogramming/Schooling**

People are deprived of their ability to invest their own time with the power to produce use-value, and are compelled to work for wages and to exchange their earnings for industrially defined rented space. They are deprived also of the opportunity to learn while building. (p. 77)

* 1. productivity (threatens participation) – Polarization

Growth would stop if women obtained equally creative work for all, instead of demanding equal rights over the gigantic and expanding tools now appropriated by men. (p.88)

To what extent within an industrialized society in which women’s right were subordinated can one criticize the right for equal rights? What does it mean to label reproductive work as “creative” work?

* 1. Obsolence (threatens tradion) and I add the right to repair
  2. Frustration (sublte threat)

**Notes/Remarks**

Many ideas formulated in *Deschooling Society* (1971) recur in *Tools for Conviviality*, and it seems that in *ToC*, Illich already formulates key ideas of *Energy and Equity*, as well as *Medical Nemesis*.

In general, I do not share all his claims against specialization and experts (e.g., doctors, scientists, lawyers, academics), but I do believe that there could be various levels of accessibility to a profession, and that accessibility should not be made scarce.

At times, the book reads as moralistic and, in some parts, is stuck in gender roles (see page 29, where he speaks of "lifeless people" who take the right to determine others as "lifeless people").

**Ellen Illich** traveled to Vienna to be attended by the best doctors during childbirth (Wikipedia EN). She was also a nurse.

I would also argue that Illich always remained a Catholic believer and that many ideas of Christianity were ingrained in his thinking (e.g., traditional gender roles, Jesus as the incarnation of God, and the presenter of love, etc.).

See some of Illich’s followers who became full Christians (e.g., Nina Power).

**Early Writing/Later Writings**

* His progressive polemics.
* Truly human values (human-centered approach) (see Sylvia Wynter?).