

Introduction to *The International Journal of Illich Studies* 1(1)

Setting a journal adrift into the digital sea that is devoted to promoting and expanding the work and ideas of Ivan Illich is an act that is, at first glance, bursting with irony. Truthfully, I have more than a sneaking suspicion that Illich himself would probably have been made ill by the very idea of a journal that is dedicated to advancing his penetrating analyses of modern society making such cavalier use of the largest and most omnipresent technology in human history. Yet, on the other hand, something inside tells me that Illich, a figure who was ostensibly contrarian by nature, would also quietly welcome the advent of a common space that allowed for acts of inquiry, discussion, memories, and creative expressions that challenge the stultifying spaces of thought and life that permeate the modern world. It is on this rather ambivalent yet honest note that we are both filled with excitement and humility in publishing this inaugural issue of *The International Journal of Illich Studies*.

In our humble estimate the time has never been riper for the voice of Illich to take a step beyond the prison of institutional obscurity and ostracization in order to begin to peck away once again at the insanity of the present social reality that modern institutions have called forth into existence. As ecological death is growing across the planet at a breakneck pace, the technocratic giants that compose the nation states of the global capitalist system fail to agree on even the simplest of remedies; Illich's diagnoses and alternatives to modern life have never ringed with such urgency as they do today. It is in the context of utter institutional failure, where *homo economicus* and his Promethean appetite for developing for development's sake, have taken humanity and nature to the brink of disaster. If Illich once talked about the medical establishment as a biocracy that controlled and managed us from "womb to tomb," we can certainly extend this argument to now include all facets of life on earth. There are few thinkers who cogently offer alternatives to the malaise of institutional gridlock as does Ivan Illich. Our current circumstance of institutional crises speaks to the need for a return to the thought of a thinker who always seemed to be ahead of most in diagnosing the disease of modernization.

The monopoly on life that professional managers retain today demonstrates time and again that keeping alive massive systems of social administration, even if they are on life support and require a fresh injection of wealth, carries with it a faith that is hard to shake. The myth of modern progress, Illich would remind us, has many followers and still controls to a great degree how we learn, heal, interact with nature, and use tools in our societies and cultures. The model of biocracy that Illich was mapping in the field of health sciences has now permeated society to such a degree that the death of capitalism still seems untenable to most even when its terminal disease has presented itself once again in another violent paroxysm. Being human is now tied to the very health and life of institutions that have as an aim the administration of our existence. Our society's good will toward the professional managers of the economic and financial systems of global capitalism is quite telling of this fact: the biocracy that controls approaches to human health that Illich lamented with great precision has now turned the health of humanity and nature into something that is tied with greater desperateness to the rising and falling of financial markets, debt rates, employment statistics, governmental and non-governmental bodies handouts, and the calculations of insurance companies. The question Illich was asking not so long ago is now staring us in the face once again: what will it take for individuals to begin to have faith in themselves and come to realize that their own abilities can be developed outside the biocratic institutions of schools, hospitals, laboratories and engineering tables, and the World Bank? It is

precisely on this question that we now need to return to one of the most trenchant critics of biocratic life and look for starting points and ideas for taking back life from the calculus of managerial society. Part of such a gesture will require a healthy dose of being made uncomfortable with ourselves. This is something at which Illich excelled.

It was perhaps Illich's ability to make people uncomfortable with themselves and the society of which they were a part that is needed now more than ever. Personally I never had the privilege to meet Illich. My knowledge of him has always been a mediated experience: either through his written words or the stories of those who met him and were profoundly moved by their encounter with the medieval scholar and priest, who emigrated to the United States from Austria in the 1950's. It is difficult to name another intellectual who continues to have such a deep connection to those who he affected in one way or another at such a profound level. Speaking for myself, Illich has become the voice in the back of my head that is constantly measuring the intentions that fill my work and life, making me question the origin and authenticity that lurks behind each one. No one with whom I have intellectually engaged has had quite the same effect.

My sense is that I am not alone in feeling this way and can only imagine that those who stood in his presence and learned from the man himself suffer from this affliction to an even greater degree. I am not sure if this aspect of Illich's spirit that lives on is entirely healthy, as it would have been much easier to not ever have been introduced to the ideas of Illich and his critiques of modern society, but I feel more enriched anyways. For those of us who are or are aspiring to be a professional in one field or another may also feel the affliction of Illich at a deeper and more disturbing level. After all, how can one read and spend time with the thought of Illich and justify their work as agents of a modern institution? This stinging question is well known and a long debated one within Illichean circles but I think it ultimately speaks volumes about Illich's ability to make people unsettled in their lives, though in a good way.

Our hope is that this journal will have a similar affect on those who read it and participate in its life. We are not quixotic enough to believe that an Illichean journal could have the same effect as the human being that was once Ivan Illich, but we nevertheless feel that the world created through the image of modern institutions could stand a little bit more of Illich's disdain, even if the primary tool being used to create this atmosphere of distrust is about as convivial as the freeway systems of modern society that Illich loathed so much. Still, with an ample sense of self reflection and unease, the commons that this journal is setting out to create can hopefully be a productive space in which to engage in a transdisciplinary dialogue with scholars, activists, educators, and other kindred souls who are seeking alternatives to biocratic life. We welcome submissions by anyone who would like to take part in such a discussion and search for reinventing what the commons can be.

The original essays and book reviews that comprise this inaugural issue, I am delighted to say, represent the very best of the Illichean spirit that this journal seeks to embody. The authors who have contributed their thoughts and ideas here constitute a blend of individuals who have personally known and worked with Illich as well as those who are carrying on his legacy in the work of second generation young scholars and activists. In the mosaic of writing that makes up this issue the goal of the journal is also clearly present: to look back to Illich and his insights as well as to look forward by reconfiguring Illichean perspectives and critiques to contemporary problems facing society and nature that continue to augment as the modern myth of progress still reigns supreme. Future issues will continue to promote the aim of extending Illich's views on contemporary education, ecological crises, medicine and health care, science and technology,

and the general advocacy for communities who stand as examples of convivial and autonomous life. We look forward to hearing from those who would like to contribute to such an endeavor.

Lastly, I would like to express my deep appreciation for those who have helped make this journal into a reality. Madhu Prakash has been a source of support and inspiration from the outset. Your kindness and work serve as a powerful example for those of us who take seriously the values and ideas that Illich cultivated and that you carry on in your life. Gregory Bourassa has done a commendable job with all of the book reviews. His keen eye and insightful suggestions have helped make the journal and the work that goes into making reviews a productive experience for both writer and reader come to fruition. Douglas Kellner must also be recognized as the one who originally thought of the idea for an Illichean journal at the annual AERA meeting in the spring of 2009. Doug's confident suggestion and support have helped this journal see the light of day. Finally, without Richard Kahn this journal would not have been born. It was from his long held respect for Illich as a human being and thinker that he felt compelled to free the spirit of someone who has had such a profound affect on his life and work and who has been abused for so long by the institutions that fear him. I think it is this latter fact that makes Illich such an attractive figure to so many of us looking for alternatives in our work and lives. I am glad that this fear of Illich still exists as it reminds me that alternatives do exist. It is just a matter of turning this fear into a widespread hope that breaking the addiction to preprogrammed life is nothing to fear at all.

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Editor