

## REDISCOVERING IVAN ILLICH

The Covid-19 pandemic has set off a perfect storm. Investments and reforms will not be enough to make our societies more sustainable, digital and inclusive; we need to take a critical look at today's socioeconomic model and find a new ethical and human balance. Rediscovering the thought of Ivan Illich is helpful.

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### A CRITIQUE OF CLICHÉS: NO TO THE *PENSÉE UNIQUE*

Ivan Illich was of mixed origins and background. Dalmatian, born in Vienna in 1926 to a Croatian father and a Sephardic Jewish mother, educated in Italy, a heterodox priest pushed aside by the hierarchy, yet deeply religious and tied to the Church; an encyclopedic, polyglot scholar who taught at several universities (including Trento, in Italy, and Cuernavaca in Mexico). And more yet: a historian, an author, a subtle polemicist up until his death in 2002, from a tumor that deformed his face and left him unable to speak. It is impossible to classify his thought, controversial and unique as it was. For Illich, the starting point of all reasoning was a critique of commonplaces, opening oneself up to different, minority, marginal viewpoints. His aim was not to provoke, but to recapture unusual visions of what had become so common that it had lost any signs of being problematic. This led him to expose the great modern illusion that «men are born to consume, and can achieve any goal by acquiring goods and services».

### A CRITIQUE OF INSTITUTIONS: OVERSTEPPING THRESHOLDS

Societies in our epoch have been irrevocably marked by health crises, financial turmoil, mass migration, global warming, growing inequalities and political regression. Institutions have proven unprepared to govern the complexity and global nature of the problems facing humanity. It isn't by chance that we have reached this point, at risk of self-destruction. Back in the 1970s and '80s Illich, in a memorable group of essays, analyses and conferences, undertook a radical critique of modern institutions and the dogma of unlimited production and development. His central argument was based on the key concept of thresholds: when institutions and technologies exceed certain quantitative and qualitative thresholds, they end up backfiring on the very reason for which they came about, and putting the entire social body at risk of destruction – phenomena that generate paradoxical, counterproductive, incapacitating outcomes. Let's look at some examples.

In *Medical Nemesis: The Expropriation of Health* (1975), Illich denounces medical hyperspecialization and identified three forms



of disease generated by medicine itself (iatrogenesis). Clinical iatrogenesis is inherent to every medical act: hospital infection, surgical complications, the side effects of drugs. With social iatrogenesis, patients are subjugated, passive, forbearing, as they rely on the clemency of the medical oligarchy. Finally, with cultural iatrogenesis, medicine, which peddles youth and immortality, inhibits our ability to suffer and leaves us unprepared for death.

In *Deschooling Society* (1971) Illich points a finger at mass education, a superficial exercise that

produces only technocrats and an asocial expert élite.

In *Energy and Equity* (1974) he decries as illogical our compulsory, traffic-filled mobility, which generates new addictions, devours time and pollutes the environment.

### CONVIVIALITY, ENCOUNTERS, FRIENDSHIP AND HOPE

Illich is neither a proponent of "happy degrowth" nor a traditionalist. The "convivial society" that he proposes is alien from the market, a space in which people are free to mold matter and knowledge with and for others according to their own inclinations, and setting their own limits.

Above all, it is a space for encounters, authentic bonds of friendship with others with whom we seek out mutual credibility, respect and commitment. Thus are born peace and a sense of community, remarks Illich, and they grow stronger thanks to these same dynamics. In this convivial atmosphere, hope is fostered as an unpredictable, unexpected, surprising gift. "The survival of the human species," Illich concludes, "depends on recovering hope as a social force."

Ivan Illich, *Opera omnia*, Neri Pozza Editore, Milano, 2020