The Thought of Ivan Illich: A Libertarian Analysis

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Contents

Introduction: Two Kinds of Society

Illich's most common term for the kind of society or mode of production he is critiquing is "industrial age." The overall theme of his projected future writing, he notes, is "an epilogue to the industrial age."

> I want to describe the fading monopoly of the industrial mode of production and the vanishing of the industrially generated professions this mode of production serves.
>
> Above all I want to show that two-thirds of mankind still can avoid passing through the industrial age, by choosing right now a postindustrial balance in their mode of production which the hyperindustrial nations will be forced to adopt as an alternative to chaos.[1]

He presents two alternative possibilities for organizing human society, for which his terms "industrial" (or "manipulative") and "convivial" are largely stand-ins, depending on how scientific discoveries are harnessed for social purposes.

> Our vision of the possible and the feasible is so restricted by industrial expectations that any alternative to more mass production sounds like a return to past oppression or like a Utopian design for noble savages. In fact, however, the vision of new possibilities requires only the recognition that scientific discoveries can be useful in at least two opposite ways. The first leads to specialization of functions, institutionalization of values and centralization of power and turns people into the accessories of bureaucracies or machines. The second enlarges the range of each person's competence, control, and initiative, limited only by other individuals' claims to an equal range of power and freedom.[2]

The second, or convivial, alternative is one "*in which modern technologies serve politically interrelated individuals rather than managers....*"[3] (It should be noted that Illich here uses "political" in the sense of the kind of deliberative democracy Murray Bookchin has advocated in his libertarian municipalist model; while it certainly does not rule out the political, it also incorporates what most anarchists would call "social.")

> 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

[1] Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (New York, Evanston, San Francisco, London: Harper & Row, 1973), xxi.

[2] *Ibid.*, xxiii-xxiv.

[3] *Ibid.*, xxiv.

> in contrast with the conditioned response of persons to the demands made upon them by others, and by a man-made environment.[4]

The tools are a means to the individual's ends, rather than the individual being adapted to the requirements of tools in order to serve the needs of an institution. "A convivial society should be designed to allow all its members the most autonomous action by means of tools least controlled by others."[5] He continues:

> Tools are intrinsic to social relationships. An individual relates himself in action to his society through the use of tools that he actively masters, or by which he is passively acted upon. To the degree that he masters his tools, he can invest the world with his meaning; to the degree that he is mastered by his tools, the shape of the tool determines his own self-image. Convivial tools are those which give each person who uses them the greatest opportunity to enrich the environment with the fruits of his or her vision. Industrial tools deny this possibility to those who use them and they allow their designers to determine the meaning and expectations of others. Most tools today cannot be used in a convivial fashion.[6]
>
> ...From a social point of view, we ought to reserve the designation "technical progress" to instances in which new tools expand the capacity and the effectiveness of a wider range of people, especially when new tools permit more autonomous production of use-values.[7]

A convivial society is characterized by equal access and the widespread distribution rather than concentration of power: "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 and limit this freedom only in favor of another member's equal freedom."[8]

Industrial society, in contrast, assumes (erroneously, as I will argue later) that "inequality is needed to maintain high outputs.... Political institutions themselves become draft mechanisms to press people into complicity with output goals. What is right comes to be subordinated to what is good for institutions."[9]

Illich makes a parallel distinction between industrial or wage labor and what he calls "vernacular work." The latter refers to "unpaid activities which provide and improve livelihood," things "derived from the commons" rather than bought or sold on the

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[4] *Ibid.*, p. 11.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 20.
[6] *Ibid.*, p. 21.
[7] Illich, "Disabling Professions," in Illich, ed., *Disabling Professions* (London: Marion Boyars, 1977), p. 34.
[8] Illich, *Tools for Conviviality*, p. 12.
[9] *Ibid.*, p. 12.

market, and overlaps imperfectly at best with the concepts of "informal sector," "use-value," and "social reproduction."[10] He states his intent to use the term "vernacular," in general, in the Roman sense: "sustenance derived from reciprocity patterns imbedded in every aspect of life, as distinguished from sustenance that comes from exchange or from vertical distribution" — i.e. from the commons, as opposed to either the cash nexus or bureaucratic management.[11]

The Two Watersheds and Counterproductivity

In *Tools for Conviviality*, Illich uses the history of medicine to illustrate what he calls the two watersheds of technology. The first watershed, from the mid-19th century through sometime in the 20th, saw the introduction of a series of technologies whose net returns were overwhelmingly positive relative to their costs: anaesthesia, antiseptic techniques, antibiotics, and non-medical practices like basic nutrition, sanitation, and rat control. The effect was a "spectacular decline in mortality."[12]

The specifically medical technologies of the first watershed have certain things in common: "where they are not monopolized by professionals as tools of their trade, those which are applicable to widespread diseases are usually very inexpensive and require a minimum of personal skills, materials, and custodial services from hospitals."[13]

The second watershed was reached when the net returns of investment in new technology were either modest or minimal compared to the cost, or actually produced negative net returns: the negative returns being exemplified by things like antibiotic-resistant bacteria, hospital-acquired illnesses, and end of life care that extended a miserable existence by a few days at the cost of years of a family's income.[14]

> The second watershed was approached when the marginal utility of further professionalization declined, at least insofar as it can be expressed in terms of the physical well-being of the largest number of people. The second watershed was superseded when the marginal disutility increased

[10] Illich, "The Three Dimensions of Public Choice," *Shadow Work* (Boston and London: Marion Boyars, 1981), p. 24. In fact, he objects to vernacular work being lumped into the informal sector or reproductive labor along with other things. The concept of the informal sector conventionally includes both vernacular work and what Illich calls "shadow work," the latter being unpaid informal labor which is integrated into the needs of capital rather than providing an alternative to it. Illich, "Vernacular Values," *Shadow Work*, p. 31.

[11] Illich, "Vernacular Values," *Shadow Work*, p. 57.

[12] Illich, *Tools for Conviviality*, pp. 1-2.

[13] Illich, *Medical Nemesis: The Expropriation of Health* (New York: Pantheon, 1976), p. 7. Pagination from pdf hosted at Library Genesis <http://library.lol/main/9B44A23A98770E885315A5DD3C77356B>. Accessed Dec. 12, 2022.

[14] Illich, *Tools for Conviviality*, p. 2.

> as further monopoly by the medical establishment became an indicator of more suffering for larger numbers of people.[15]

Beyond the second watershed, tools, technologies and institutions become counter-productive: "When an enterprise grows beyond a certain point..., it frustrates the end for which it was originally designed, and then becomes a threat to society itself."[16]

> Our major institutions have acquired the uncanny power to subvert the very purposes for which they had been engineered and financed originally. Under the rule of our most prestigious professions, our institutional tools have as their principle product paradoxical counterproductivity....[17]

For Illich, this is a general paradigm that goes beyond healthcare. "Other industrial institutions have passed through the same two watersheds."

> At first, new knowledge is applied to the solution of a clearly stated problem and scientific measuring sticks are applied to account for the new efficiency. But at a second point, the progress demonstrated in a previous achievement is used as a rationale for the exploitation of society as a whole in the service of a value which is determined and constantly revised by an element of society, by one of its self-certifying professional élites.[18]

The second watershed tends to be associated with an institutional culture of high overhead, with a drastic escalation in costs for each new unit of output — and then a continued escalation of costs coupled with an actual decline in output.

> During the last twenty years, the United States price index has risen by about 74 per cent, but the cost of medical care has escalated by 330 per cent. While public expenditure for health care has increased tenfold, out-of-pocket payments for health services have risen threefold and the cost of private insurance eighteenfold. The cost of community hospitals has increased 500 per cent since 1950. The bill for patient care in major hospitals has risen even faster, tripling in eight years. Administrative expenses have multipled by a factor ofseven, laboratory costs by a factor of five. Building a hospital bed now costs $65,000, of which two-thirds goes toward mechanical equipment written off or made redundant within ten years or less.

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[15] *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

[16] *Ibid.*, xxii-xxiii.

[17] Illich, "Disabling Professions," in Illich, ed., *Disabling Professions* (London: Marion Boyars, 1977), p. 28.

[18] Illich, *Tools for Conviviality*, p. 7.

> Yet during this same period of unprecedented inflation, life expectancy for adult American males has declined.[19]
>
> It can be demonstrated that beyond a certain point in the expansion of industrial production in any major field of value, marginal utilities cease to be equitably distributed and over-all effectiveness begins, simultaneously, to decline.[20]

In addition, an institution approaching its second watershed "tends to become highly manipulative." In other words: "Increasingly, components intended for the accomplishment of institutional purposes are redesigned so that they cannot be used independently."[21]

> There are two ranges in the growth of tools: the range within which machines are used to extend human capability and the range in which they are used to contract, eliminate, or replace human functions. In the first, man as an individual can exercise authority on his own behalf and therefore assume responsibility. In the second, the machine takes over — first reducing the range of choice and motivation in both the operator and the client, and second imposing its own logic and demand on both.[22]

This leads us to our discussion of radical monopoly and institutional dependency in the following sections.

Radical Monopoly

Standard monopoly, in the microeconomic sense, is when one firm in a market secures a dominant position in supplying a particular good. Radical monopoly, in contrast, is when an entire institutional complex makes the type of good itself artificially necessary in order to exist and crowds out alternatives. "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."[23]

> I use the term "radical monopoly" to designate... the substitution of an industrial product or a professional service for a useful activity in which people engage or would like to engage. A radical monopoly paralyzes autonomous action in favor of professional deliveries.[24]

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[19] "Tantalizing Needs," in Illich, *Toward a History of Needs* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), p. 94.

[20] Illich, *Medical Nemesis*, p. 103.

[21] Illich, *Tools for Conviviality*, p. 23.

[22] *Ibid.*, pp. 84-85.

[23] Illich, *Tools for Conviviality*, p. 53.

The classic example of radical monopoly is car culture and its attendant urban sprawl.

> Cars can thus monopolize traffic. They can shape a city into their image — practically ruling out locomotion on foot or by bicycle in Los Angeles.... That motor traffic curtails the right to walk, not that more people drive Chevies than Fords, constitutes radical monopoly.... [T]he radical monopoly cars establish is destructive in a special way. Cars create distance.... They drive wedges of highways into populated areas, and then extort tolls on the bridge over the remoteness between people that was manufactured for their sake. This monopoly over land turns space into car fodder. It destroys the environment for feet and bicycles.[24]
>
> ...A radical monopoly paralyzes autonomous action in favor of professional deliveries. The more completely vehicles dislocate people, the more traffic managers will be needed, and the more powerless people will be to walk home.[26]

Another example is how the institutional complex around the building industry — contracting firms, materials production, building codes, etc. — has reinforced its own power at the expense of convivial alternatives. Favelas and shantytowns — often displaying a high degree of craftsmanship and technical skill — exist on the outskirts of cities all over the Global South (Colin Ward has a considerable body of work on the tradition of self-built housing in the West, as well[25]). It's entirely feasible, technically, to produce construction materials conducive to self-built housing by amateurs. "Components for new houses and utilities could be made very cheaply and designed for self-assembly."[26] Not only do local building codes prohibit such construction as unsafe, but they also prohibit competitive pressure for even professional contracting firms to adopt cheaper, vernacular building techniques using locally sourced material, by codifying conventional methods into law.

The problem of radical monopoly is exacerbated by a shared institutional culture that can imagine no solution to the negative effects of radical monopoly but to intensify the scale of the monopoly. With entire sincerity, for the most part, the managerial elites in a given policy area which suffers from the pathologies of radical monopoly are conditioned to perceive as "extreme" any proposed solution that cannot be carried out within the existing institutional framework, by people like themselves. That is, "the institution has come to define the purpose."[27] The only cure for a managerial bureaucracy's mismanagement is to give it more resources and control. The standard

[24] Illich, *Tools for Conviviality*, p. 52.

[25] See Carson, *The Anarchist Thought of Colin Ward* (Center For a Stateless Society, 2014) <http://c4ss.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/colinward.pdf>.

[26] Illich, *Tools for Conviviality*, p. 62.

[27] *Ibid.*, p. 19.

approach of a managerial bureaucracy is to "solve a crisis by escalation."[28] Reforms which are carried out within the framework of radical monopoly "escalate what they are meant to eliminate."[29]

The managerialist and bureaucratic culture of radical monopoly institutions, and their tendency toward high overhead and waste, exacerbates the declining cost-effectiveness associated with the second watershed. Although, as we shall see in a later section, Illich's critique of healthcare is at times problematic — or even eugenicist — many of his observations on the institutional culture are on the mark. Institutional healthcare is governed by the same cost-maximization incentives that Seymour Melman observed in Pentagon contractors and regulated public utilities — or what Paul Goodman called "the great domain of cost-plus."[30]

> The phenomenal rise in cost of health services in the United States has been explained in different ways: some blame irrational planning, others the higher cost of the new gimmicks that people want in hospitals. The most common interpretation at present relates to the growing incidence of prepayment of services. Hospitals register well-insured patients, and rather than providing old products more efficiently and cheaply, are economically motivated to move towards new and increasingly expensive ways of doing things. Changing products rather than higher labor costs, bad administration, or lack of technological progress are blamed for the rise.[31]

Cost inflation is also driven by the fact that medical treatment is typically ordered by institutional consumers who do not themselves pay for it, for the use of someone else:

> As commodities, prescription drugs behave differently from most other items: they are products that the ultimate consumer rarely selects for himself. The producer's sales efforts are directed at the "instrumental consumer," the doctor who prescribes but does not pay for the product.[32]

Institutionalization of Values

As we have already seen, institutional complexes are at the heart of radical monopoly. Illich posits a spectrum of institutional types, ranging from entirely

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[28] *Ibid.*, p. 9.

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 8.

[30] Paul Goodman, *People or Personnel*, in *People or Personnel* and *Like a Conquered Province* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), p. 115. "Everywhere one turns...," he observed, "there seems to be a markup of 300 and 400 percent, to do anything or make anything." *Ibid.*, p. 120.

[31] Illich, *Medical Nemesis*, p. 17.

[32] *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

"convivial" institutions on the far left to "manipulative" ones on the far right. As he compares them, respectively:

> Telephone link-ups, subway lines, mail routes, public markets and exchanges do not require hard or soft sells to induce their clients to use them. Sewage systems, drinking water, parks, and sidewalks are institutions men use without having to be institutionally convinced that it is to their advantage to do so....
>
> ...Right-wing institutions tend to be highly complex and costly production processes in which much of the elaboration and expense is concerned with convincing consumers that they cannot live without the product or the treatment offered by the institution. Left-wing institutions tend to be networks which facilitate client-initiated communication or cooperation.[33]

One side-effect of radical monopoly is that the formerly autonomous and self-directed individual is taught to view herself as the consumer of outputs produced by such institutional complexes, and as a client of the professional bureaucrats who manage them. Society, previously the cooperative endeavor of such individuals, is subsumed under the control of the institutions and their managerial bureaucracies.

In his first major work, *Deschooling Society*, Illich treated institutional schooling as a case study in his larger paradigm of institutional dependency; as he remarked later in *Tools for Conviviality*, "Our analysis of schooling has led us to recognize the mass production of education as a paradigm for other industrial enterprises...."[34]

In particular, students learn that "whatever a major institution produces has value."[35] And, conversely, value is equated to the output of institutions. Schooling is the student's first step in learning "to confuse process and substance."

> Health, learning, dignity, independence, and creative endeavor are defined as little more than the performance of the institutions which claim to serve these ends, and their improvement is made to depend on allocating more resources to the management of hospitals, schools, and other agencies in question.[36]

Ultimately, the equation of value with institutional process leads to the treatment of the processing of inputs by an institution as a proxy for the output of actual useful goods and services.

Schooling is usually also students' first absorption of the lesson that consumption, or self-directed production, independently of such institutions and without their oversight, is subversive; they learn to

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[33] Illich, *Deschooling Society* (New York, Evanston, San Francisco, London: Harper & Row, 1970), pp. 54-55.

[34] Illich, *Tools for Conviviality*, xxii.

[35] *Ibid.*, p. 62.

[36] Illich, *Deschooling Society*, p. 1.

> view doctoring oneself as irresponsible, learning on one's own as unreliable, and community organization, when not paid for by those in authority, as a form of aggression or subversion.... [T]he reliance on institutional treatment renders independent accomplishment suspect.[37]

They go on to learn, as they enter the adult world, that "work" is not something one *does* but something that is *given* by institutions.[38]

> What counts in a market-intensive society is not the effort to please or the pleasure that flows from that effort but the coupling of the labor force with capital. What counts is not the achievement of satisfaction that flows from action but the status of the social relationship that commands production — that is, the job, situation, post, or appointment.... [E]ffort is not productive unless it is done at the behest of a boss, and economists have a hard time dealing with the obvious usefulness of people when they are outside the corporate control of a corporation, volunteer agency, or labor camp. Work is productive, respectable, worthy of the citizen only when the work process is planned, monitored, and controlled by a professional agent, who ensures that the work meets a certified need in a standardized fashion. In an advanced industrial society it becomes almost impossible to seek, or even to imagine, unemployment as a condition for autonomous, useful work. The infrastructure of society is so arranged that only the job gives access to the tools of production...[39]

Schooling is typically the first of many experiences with institutions over the course of a lifetime, by which

> all our activities tend to take the shape of client relationships to other specialized institutions. Once the self-taught man or woman has been discredited, all nonprofessional activity is rendered suspect. In school we are taught that valuable learning is the result of attendance; that the value of learning increases with the amount of input; and, finally, that this value can be measured and documented by grades and certificates.[40]

A parallel tendency is to replace the concept of individual *action* with that of the institutional service as a *commodity*.

> The illusion that economic models can ignore use-values springs from the assumption that those activities that we designate by intransitive verbs

[37] *Ibid.*, p. 2.
[38] Illich, *Tools for Conviviality*, p. 89.
[39] "Useful Unemployment and Its Professional Enemies," in Illich, *Toward a History of Needs*, p. 46.
[40] Illich, *Deschooling Society*, p. 39.

> can be indefinitely substituted with institutionally-defined staples referred to by nouns. Education replaces "I learn"; health care replaces "I heal"; transportation replaces "I move"; TV replaces "I play".[43]

The primary function of all of these institutions, which either originated or reached their current proportions with the rise of monopoly capital, is to serve as adjuncts to monopoly capital: to organize society around the needs of mass-production industry. Their most important function is to process the human inputs to the industrial system and dispose of its human waste byproducts (i.e. prisons and welfare for surplus labor), to engage in wasteful consumption in their own right, or to generate popular demand for industrial output. "For Marx, the cost of producing demands for commodities was barely significant. Today most human labor is engaged in the production of demands that can be satisfied by industry which makes intensive use of capital. Most of this is done in school."[41]

Although the ideology of capitalist modernism treats the professional services rendered by such institutions as an achievement of material progress, their real effect is to produce a sort of high-priced dependency and poverty. They render the individual impoverished through the inability to use her own skills and social ties, her own human capital, to meet her needs without the intermediation of a professionalized bureaucracy.

> The peculiarly modern inability to use personal endowments, communal life, and environmental resources in an autonomous way infects every aspect of life where a professionally engineered commodity has succeeded in replacing a culturally shaped use-value. The opportunity to experience personal and social satisfaction outside the market is thus destroyed. I am poor, for instance, when the use-value of my feet is lost because I live in Los Angeles or work on the thirty-fifth floor.[42]

In this regard institutional dependency — "modernized poverty" or "institutional impotence" — shows its unbreakable relationship to radical monopoly: it is achieved by the crowding out of alternatives. The individual is prevented from doing without the goods and services produced by institutional complexes. "Where this kind of poverty reigns, life without addictive access to commodities is rendered either impossible or criminal. Making do without consumption becomes impossible, not just for the average consumer but even for the poor." An increasing share of the goods we consume are organized "as a commodity rather than an activity." "Whether the product is provided by an entrepreneur or an apparatchik, the effective result is the same: citizen impotence, our specifically modern experience of poverty."[43]

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[41] Illich, *Deschooling Society*, p. 46.

[42] "Introduction," in Illich, *Toward a History of Needs*, viii.

[43] *Ibid.*, viii.

The sort of technocratic professionalism associated with radical monopoly — "disabling professions" — differs from the skilled trades and the old liberal professions primarily in terms of the authority attached to them.

> Gravediggers... did not become members of a profession by calling themselves morticians, by obtaining college credentials, by raising their incomes, or by getting rid of the odor attached to their trade by electing one of themselves president of the Lion's Club. Morticians formed a profession, a dominant and disabling one, when they acquired the muscle to have the police stop your burial if you are not embalmed and boxed by them.[44]
>
> The commons are extinguished and replaced by a new placenta built of funnels that deliver professional services.[45]

This last point is key. The caring professions and managerial institutions, which treat the human beings they deal with mainly as objects of their authority rather than clients, have crowded out self-managed commons, the social sector, and other autonomous social bodies.

> The Age of Professions will be remembered as the time when politics withered, when voters, guided by professors, entrusted to technocrats the power to legislate needs, renounced the authority to decide who needs what and suffered monopolistic oligarchies to determine the means by which these needs shall be met.[46]

Despite a great deal of crankery in his analysis of healthcare, Illich is entirely correct that institutionalized systems of care for the aged and the chronically ill or disabled have suppressed possibilities for care at home or in society at large rather than working with and enabling them.

> As more old people become dependent on professional services, more people are pushed into specialized institutions for the old, while the home neighborhood becomes increasingly inhospitable to those who hang on. These institutions seem to be the contemporary strategy for the disposal of the old, who have been institutionalized in more frank and arguably less hideous forms by most other societies. The mortality rate during the first year after institutionalization is significantly higher than the rate for those who stay in their accustomed surroundings. Separation from home contributes to the appearance and mortality of many a serious disease.[47]

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[44] "Useful Unemployment and Its Professional Enemies," in Illich, *Toward a History of Needs*, p. 27.

[45] *Ibid.*, p. 34.

[46] Illich, "Disabling Professions," in Illich, ed., *Disabling Professions* (London: Marion Boyars, 1977), p. 12.

[47] Illich, *Medical Nemesis*, p. 28.

In his analysis of radical monopoly and institutional dependency, Illich provides an insightful critique of the ideology of meritocracy. "An increase in social mobility can render society more human, but only if at the same time there is a narrowing of the difference in power which separates the few from the many."[48] It doesn't really matter how quickly an individual can move through the hierarchies of power, if the power structure itself is unjust. What matters is the cross-section of power at any given time, and whether those at the top benefit at the expense of those below.

Critiques

Failure to Understand the Nature of the Second Watershed. To get an idea of where Illich goes wrong in his framing of the two watersheds and radical monopoly, we need only look at the language he uses throughout *Tools for Conviviality*: "we must set... limits on industrial growth"; "setting upper limits to productivity"[!]; "restrain the power of man's tools when they tend to overwhelm man and his goals"; "responsibly limited tools"; "public controls over tools and institutions that curtail or negate any person's right to the creative use of his or her energy"; "politically defined limits on all types of industrial growth"; "desirable limitations to specialization and output"; "political approval for the existence of tools that... restrict to a very few the liberty to use them in an autonomous way"; "Supersonic transports could easily be ruled out"; "limits to overefficiency"; "limits on tools"; "a limit on vehicular velocity"; "set boundaries on their tools for the sake of conviviality."

Illich fundamentally misunderstands the causes of "growth." In his framing of technology, "overly-efficient tools" by their very nature and by their very existence carry an inherent totalizing imperative by which they will grow to reshape society in their own image, unless constrained by some outside force.

> If the industrial mode of production expands beyond a certain stage and continues to impinge on the autonomous mode, increased personal suffering and social dissolution set in. In the interim—between the point of optimal synergy between industrial and autonomous production and the point of maximum tolerable industrial hegemony—political and juridical procedures become necessary to reverse industrial expansion.[49]

His misunderstanding leads him to write some things about the second watershed and negative externalities that are just straight-up nonsense:

> But most externalities cannot be quantified and internalized: if gasoline prices are raised to reduce depletion of oil stocks and of atmospheric oxygen, each passengermile becomes more costly and more of a privilege; environmental damage is lessened but social injustice is increased. Beyond a

[48] Illich, *Tools for Conviviality*, p. 84.
[49] Illich, *Medical Nemesis*, p. 103.

> certain level of intensity of industrial production, externalities cannot be reduced but only shifted around.[50]

Contrary to Illich, if those enjoying the benefits of a technology are forced to bear the full cost as well, rather than externalizing it on society, then it will not be adopted beyond the point at which they find the costs outweigh the benefits. It will not be adopted by society as a whole to the extent where the non-privileged are forced to use it even when they find it detrimental. Absent subsidized highways and car-centered zoning, the automobile would have remained a plaything for the rich; a cheap, stripped-down version might have served as well as a useful tool for niche markets (e.g. farmers) not served by the compact mixed-use communities that predated car culture.

In Illich's view of things, it is the tools or technologies which precede the power structure, with the latter inevitably growing out of the former.

The truth is directly the opposite. Technology does not spontaneously proliferate like tribbles,

absent the imposition of external bounds, until it spawns authoritarian bureaucracies. Rather, the technologies are imposed because they suit the needs of power structures. A technology, industry, or institution is able to grow beyond the second watershed and into the realm of negative returns, only because institutional power structures are able to internalize the benefits for themselves while externalizing the negative effects on a public to whom they are unaccountable.

"...O]nly within limits," Illich says, "can machines take the place of slaves; beyond these limits they lead to a new kind of serfdom."

> Only within limits can education fit people into a man-made environment: beyond these limits lies the universal schoolhouse, hospital ward, or prison. Only within limits ought politics to be concerned with the distribution of maximum industrial outputs, rather than with equal inputs of either energy or information.[51]

This is true. But the necessary limits are not those imposed from without against technologies whose inherent nature — "excess efficiency" — causes them to otherwise grow without limit. The limits are those set by the people who experience both the benefits and negative consequences of the tools they adopt, when governance authority is vested directly in those who are affected by the policies of institutions and do their actual work rather than in an unaccountable hierarchy that serves its own interests or those of absentee rentiers.

Illich also gives insufficient critical analysis to the actual *causes* of the negative net returns beyond the second watershed. Do the costs of a technology exceed the benefits as a result of characteristics inherent to the technology, or because of the institutional

[50] *Ibid.*, pp. 78-79.

[51] Illich, *Tools for Conviviality*, xxiv.

factors governing its adoption? In the case of medical technology, there will be some minimal cost floor resulting from the inherent material cost of producing it; but the actual cost is arguably higher than this minimal floor as a result of additional factors. Obviously there will be *some* threshold beyond which the adoption of a technology costs more than the benefits are worth; but is that threshold artificially low as a result of institutional considerations, and might it be shifted upward by changing the institutional framework? For example, might not factors like legal monopoly rights — patents, proprietary software, licensing, artificial entry barriers, etc. — result in healthcare prices which consist in large part of embedded rents? Might not state policy crowd out cheaper ways of using the same technologies? In such a case, both the negative net returns beyond the second watershed, and all the pathologies of the radical monopoly, might result from bureaucratic control (as opposed to democratic community control) over the delivery of service rather than from the nature of the services themselves.

In the case of car culture, the problems of sprawl and automobile dependency did not inevitably result from the automobile itself, but from the power interests that redesigned society around it. The problem was created by subsidies to monoculture development, freeways systems imposed by eminent domain, and legal prohibitions — like zoning — against mixed-use development.

Before the rise of car culture and car-centered urban design, the norm was the compact, mixed-use city or town where residences were within foot, bicycle, bus or streetcar distance of the downtown district where people worked or shopped. Increased population was accommodated primarily by modular proliferation — e.g. the railroad suburb — rather than outward sprawl.

Absent the imposition of car culture by the federal and local governments and by the local real estate industry, the automobile would have served a useful niche function in cities laid out in the old fashion. Its primary market would have been people like farmers in the areas outside cities, where population concentrations were insufficient to be served by streetcar or rail lines. For periodic trips into town and back, perhaps in a small truck capable of conveying a load of vegetables to the farmers' market or bringing home groceries and dry goods, a light internal combustion engine or electric motor would have been sufficient. With no need for rapid acceleration on the freeway, there would be no point for heavy engine blocks with six cylinders, and the overall weight of the vehicle could be reduced accordingly. With flat body panels capable of being produced on a cutting table, there would have been no need for Detroit's two- or three-story stamping presses. The automobile industry would have been an affair of hundreds of local factories.

Hence it is not true that "[p]ast a certain threshold of energy consumption, the transportation industry dictates the configuration of social space."[52] Rather, the configuration of social space dictates the forms of transportation adopted, which dictates the level of energy consumption.

[52] "Energy and Equity," in Illich, *Toward a History of Needs*, p. 121.

Illich's tendency to see the proliferation of managerial bureaucracies and their unwilling clienteles as an expansionary phenomenon in its own right with no need for a causal explanation, rather than a secondary effect of larger class and power interests, is also illustrated in his treatment of squatters.

> Both the non-modernized and the post-modern oppose society's ban on spatial self-assertion, and will have to reckon with the police intervening against the nuisance they create. They will be branded as intruders, illegal occupants, anarchists and nuisances, depending on the circumstance under which they assert their liberty to dwell: as Indians who break in and settle on fallow land in Lima; as *favellados* in Rio de Janeiro, who return to squat on the hillside from which they have just been driven — after 40 years' occupancy — by the police; as students who dare to convert ruins in Berlin's Kreuzberg into their dwelling; as Puerto Ricans who force their way back into the walled-up and burnt buildings of the South Bronx. *They will all be removed, not so much because of the damage they do to the owner of the site, or because they threaten the health or peace of their neighbors, but because of the challenge to the social axiom that defines a citizen as a unit in need of a standard garage.* [emphasis added]
>
> Both the Indian tribe that moves down from the Andes into the suburbs of Lima and the Chicago neighborhood council that unplugs itself from the city housing authority challenge the now-prevalent model of the citizen as *homo castrensis*, billeted man.[53]

Illich's framing of this as some inherent expansionary logic or hegemonic drive inherent in the "managerial-professional classes" themselves, and not the outcome of a much larger, long-term process of land privatization and enclosure driven by capitalist class interests, is a major critical failure.

Failure to Recognize Alternative Industrial Possibilities. Illich's misunderstanding of "overly efficient tools" or "malignant tools" is directly analogous to the misunderstanding of counterproductivity we examined in the previous section. He assumes the very invention and free availability of "over-efficient tools" automatically leads to a second threshold and rule by a managerial elite — when in fact the second threshold is reached only when it is *imposed* by such elites. Counterproductivity is the effect, not the cause, of institutionalization and rule by managerial elites.

But tools are not adopted without limit because they are "overly efficient" and crowd more appropriate means out through their superior efficiency. Neither is the problem "the illusion that machine power can indefinitely take the place of manpower," or that

[53] "Dwelling," in Ivan Illich, *In the Mirror of the Past: Lectures and Addresses, 1978-1990* (London and New York: Marion Boyars Publishers, 1992), pp. 58-59.

"high quanta of energy degrade social relations just as inevitably as they destroy the physical milieu."[54]

The problem is not high quanta of energy or machine power as such, but the fact that they are adopted without regard to the scale of the production stream required to fulfill a given amount of demand. Instead energy quanta and machine power are maximized for their own sake, completely out of scale to the production stream needed to supply existing demand — and then the total costs of all the measures taken to guarantee consumption of the resulting output exceed the cost allegedly saved by such "economies of scale." Capitalist industry is enabled to adopt capital-intensive mass-production techniques on such a scale, despite their gross inefficiency, because it is in a position to externalize the inefficiency costs on the consumer or taxpayer.

The "malignant tool" is only adopted because it is benign to those who make the decision to adopt, and they can externalize the malignancy on everybody else. The solution is not to "exclude" such tools, but to vest control over all social organizations in the hands of those affected by their decisions.

Contrary to the claim of the corporate state that the mass-production institutional structure is necessary in order to "maintain high outputs" — a claim Illich takes at face value — that structure does not maximize growth in outputs, in the sense of material consumption, at all. Rather, it maximizes consumption of inputs by the production process — a response to the imperatives to maximize utilization of production capacity, through waste and inefficiency if necessary. The very definition of "growth," under mass-production capitalism — an increase in GDP — equates to an increased total value of production inputs consumed.

Illich had no coherent conception of growth. Degrowth, properly understood, is to be achieved not by reducing either the material standard of consumption or level of output *as such*, but by destroying the growth in monetized exchange value (which is a measure of the total cost of resource inputs consumed in producing a given level of output). The proper approach is not to impose austerity or limit consumption *as such*, but to limit the use of resource inputs — in other words, to cease subsidizing the consumption of resources and allowing capitalist corporations to treat them as artificially abundant. The problem of growth must be attacked at the resource end, not the consumption end.[55]

Illich explicitly seeks "lower industrial efficiency."[56] But the problem is deliberate *in*efficiency, for the sake of maximizing the utilization of productive capacity. Mass-production tools are only "over-efficient" in the sense that they are too efficient for a production stream determined solely in relation to autonomous demand. The ideal, from the standpoint of genuine efficiency, would be to site the production process as close as

[54] "Energy and Equity," in Illich, *Toward a History of Needs*, p. 111.

[55] Carson, *We Are All Degrowthers. We Are All Ecomodernists. Analysis of a Debate* (Center For a Stateless Society, 2019) <https://c4ss.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/We-Are-All-Degrowthers_We-Are-All-Ecomodernists_Carson.pdf>.

[56] Illich, *Tools for Conviviality*, p. 20.

possible to the point of consumption, scale the production stream to autonomous demand, and scale the machinery to the production stream. Mass-production capitalism instead maximizes the output of the individual machine without regard to the demand, which in turn requires redesigning the entire society around a Rube Goldberg device of subsidized waste, long-distance distribution, and high-pressure mass marketing in order to guarantee the consumption of output undertaken without regard to autonomous demand and keep those machines running.

For Illich, "mass-production industry" is redundant. He mistakenly views mass-production technology as being somehow inherent to industry as such, leaving only a false choice between mass production industry and individual hand tools (albeit far higher in quality thanks to 20th century design and materials science). His ignorance of the alternatives comes through in this passage:

> Tools for a convivial and yet efficient society could not have been designed at an earlier stage of history. We now can design the machinery for eliminating slavery without enslaving man to the machine. Science and technology are not bound to the peculiar notion, seemingly characteristic of the last 150 years of their application to production, that new knowledge of nature's laws has to be locked into increasingly more specialized and highly capitalized preparation of men to use them. The sciences, which specialized out of philosophy, have become the rationale for an increasing division of operations. The division of labor has finally led to the *labor-saving* division of tools. New technology is now used to amplify supply funnels for commodities. Public utilities are turned from facilities for persons into arenas for the owners of expensive tools. The use of science and technology constantly supports the industrial mode of production, and thereby crowds off the scene all tool shops for independent enterprise.[57]

And elsewhere he mentions a pathology specific to mass production as something characteristic of industry itself: "Products cannot be improved unless huge machines are *retooled — and* in the technical sense engineers have given this word. To make this pay, huge markets must be created for the new model."[58]

One is tempted to excuse Illich, as a man of his time, for failing to realize the potential of alternative forms of small-scale industrial organization. But he didn't artificially limit the choices to mass-production industry and human-powered tools for want of available alternatives. Illich himself litters his writing with references that make it clear he was exposed to the alternatives, leaving little credible basis upon which to absolve him of willfully ignoring them.

It is telling that, in *Tools for Conviviality*, Illich quotes from and discusses at length Lewis Mumford's *The Pentagon of Power*[59] — a book far more pessimistic in its view

[57] *Ibid.*, p. 33.
[58] *Ibid.*, p. 74.
[59] *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

of technology than Mumford's earlier work, and much closer in spirit to Jacques Ellul in viewing industrial

technology as an inherently totalizing force. It seems quite implausible that Illich was honestly unaware of *Technics and Civilization*, Mumford's more optimistic earlier work, in which he described in great detail the decentralizing potential of "neotechnic" manufacturing technologies based on electrically-powered machinery.

And Illich's rejection of viable alternatives is hardly limited to selective ignorance concerning Mumford's work. Writing in 1977, he not only hinted at familiarity with a whole genre of contemporary writing on decentralist, human-scale economic models, but apparently alluded to the work of the *Radical Technology* group in particular:

> In our days, use-value-centered theories that analyze the social costs generated by established economics are certainly not rare. Such theories are being proposed by dozens of outsiders, who often identify them with radical technology, ecology, community lifestyles, smallness, or beauty.[60]

Had Illich read *Technics and Civilization* — as he surely must have — he would have learned that alternative possibilities for convivial, small-scale machine production and large-scale, capital-intensive mass production both date back to their common origins in the introduction of electrically powered machinery in the Second Industrial Revolution. The apostles of industrial decentralism — Pyotr Kropotkin and Ralph Borsodi, along with Mumford — saw small shop production with powered craft tools to be most in keeping with the liberatory spirit of electrical power. The mass-production alternative was chosen, not because of any superior generic efficiency, but for its superior efficiency specifically in serving the interests of the capital-state nexus.

A fundamentally different form of industrial organization — the decentralized craft model favored by Kropotkin *et al.*, using general purpose machinery in neighborhood or small town workshops and switching between product lines on a demand-pull basis — would arguably be ideal for achieving Illich's standards of conviviality. This model of production, unlike mass production, does not entail totalizing social control. Because it relies on general purpose machinery and can quickly shift between production lines, it empowers the craft workers in the shop; at the same time, it undertakes production only in response to autonomous demand without a need to reconstruct society around a guaranteed need for its output.[61]

What Illich failed to acknowledge was that many such models were *industrial*, and that an increasingly high technology — the integration of miniaturized computers into general-purpose tools — was facilitating the feasibility of decentralized industrial production and the reskilling of industrial labor.

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[60] "Useful Unemployment and Its Professional Enemies," in Illich, *Toward a History of Needs*, p. 9.

[61] See, inter alia, my introduction to the new C4SS edition of Colin Ward's annotated and abridged version of *Kropotkin's Fields, Factories, and Workshops Tomorrow* <https://c4ss.org/content/25051>.

Illich himself acknowledges that the convivial vs. industrial distinction is independent of "the level of technology of the tool"; e.g. the telephone, which he regards as a convivial tool, is "the result of advanced engineering."[62] The defining feature of convivial technology is not whether it is "high" or "low," but the functional relationship of the tool to the human being and to the larger society. As he himself observed, while failing to draw the logical conclusion:

> There is nothing inevitable about the expanding professional monopoly over new technology. The great inventions of the last hundred years, such as new metals, ball-bearings, some building materials, electronics, some tests and remedies, are capable of increasing the power of both the heteronomous and the autonomous modes of production....
>
> The same subservience to the idea of progress conceives of engineering principally as a contribution to institutional effectiveness. Scientific research is highly financed, but only if it can be applied for military use or for further professional domination. Alloys which make bicycles both stronger and lighter are a fall-out of research designed to make jets faster and weapons deadlier. But the results of most research go solely into industrial tools, thus making already huge machines even more complex and inscrutable.[63]

In the end he falls back on the same misconception: the identification of industry, as such, with mass production and capital-intensiveness ("huge machines"). Some forms of industrial production with powered machinery are permissible — but only to produce more sophisticated versions of tools powered by the human body.

This is far from the only time Illich approaches the truth concerning technology, and then falls away from it. Concerning education, he writes:

> A contemporary myth would make us believe that the sense of impotence with which most men live today is the consequence of a technology that cannot but create huge systems. But it is not technology that makes systems huge, tools immensely powerful, channels of communication one-directional. Quite the contrary. Properly controlled, technology could provide each man with the ability to understand his environment better and to shape it powerfully with his own hands, and would permit him full intercommunication to a degree never before possible. Such an alternative use of technology constitutes the central alternative in education.[64]

Time and again, he mixes a near-grasp at the actual problem with muddled misdiagnoses. He starts by calling for

[62] Illich, *Tools for Conviviality*, p. 22.
[63] "Useful Unemployment and Its Professional Enemies," in Illich, *Toward a History of Needs*, p. 41.
[64] "In Lieu of Education," in Illich, *Toward a History of Needs*, p. 86.

> a radical reduction of the professional structure that now impedes the relationship between the scientist and the majority of people who want access to science. If this demand were heeded, all men could learn to use yesterday's tools, rendered more effective and durable by modern science, to create tomorrow's world.
>
> Unfortunately, precisely the contrary trend prevails at present. I know a coastal area in South America where most people support themselves by fishing from small boats. The outboard motor is certainly the tool that has changed the lives of these coastal fishermen most dramatically. But in the area I have surveyed, half of all outboard motors that were purchased between 1945 and 1950 are still kept running by constant tinkering, while half the motors purchased in 1965 no longer run because they were not built to be repaired. Technological progress provides the majority of people with gadgets they cannot afford and deprives them of the simpler tools they need.
>
> Metals, plastics, and ferroconcrete used in building have greatly improved since the 1940s and ought to provide more people the opportunity to create their own homes. But while in 1948 more than 30 per cent of all one-family homes in the United States were owner-built, by the end of the 1960s the percentage of those who acted as their own contractors had dropped to less than 20 per cent.[65]

"[Y]esterday's tools, rendered more effective and durable by modern science," is actually an excellent description of the kind of high-tech craft tools used for networked job shop production in the Emilia-Romagna model[66], or for the modular ecology of open-source machine tools, farm and construction equipment, etc., in the Global Village Construction Set developed at Open Source Ecology's Factor-e Farm demo project.[67] Although Illich would no doubt reflexively dismiss these examples as "industrial" (which they are), they are also examples of the "technological progress" he decries *providing* people with liberatory tools. They are also a synthesis of pre-factory production models with the latest technology, in much the same way Illich describes. And this model of production, thanks to its lack of the mass-production imperative of avoiding idle capacity in expensive capital goods, would not be driven to the design of irreparable products for the sake of planned obsolescence.

> Educational considerations permit us to formulate a second fundamental characteristic that any postindustrial society must possess: a basic tool kit

[65] *Ibid.*, p. 89.

[66] Kevin A. Carson, The Homebrew Industrial Revolution: A Low-Overhead Manifesto (C4SS, 2010) <https://kevinacarson.org/pdf/hir.pdf>, pp. 178-179.

[67] <https://wiki.opensourceecology.org/wiki/Slide_1>; Carson, *Homebrew Industrial Revolution*, pp. 238-245.

> that by its very nature counteracts technocratic control. For educational reasons we must work toward a society in which scientific knowledge is incorporated in tools and components that can be used meaningfully in units small enough to be within the reach of all. Only such tools can socialize access to skills. Only such tools favor temporary associations among those who want to use them on specific occasions. Only such tools allow specific goals to emerge in the process of their use, as any tinkerer knows.[68]

But it is precisely the integration of computer numeric control into general-purpose craft tools, scaled to tabletop production in a neighborhood shop, that offers the potential for achieving all these things. Such tools are ideally suited to production by master trade workers in self-managed shops, or by skilled amateurs producing directly for use in the social or household sector (like a hackerspace, or the common machine shop of a cohousing unit).

Contra Illich, the solution is not to set artificial constraints on the size or efficiency of machines. It is to restore the proper order of consideration, and decide first on the ends before selecting the means by which to achieve them. The mass-production model takes the degree of centralization and the size of the machinery as a given, treating the means as an end, and then designs social consumption as a means to serve the mass-production process. Instead, we should take the scale of autonomously created demand as a given, determine the size of the production stream needed to meet that demand, and then determine the size and efficiency of machines which would be most efficiently scaled to that production stream. We do not limit tools in order to permit relocalized, self-managed economies; we create relocalized, self-managed economies and leave the choice of tools to them. Solve the problem of power, and the problems of energy quanta and tools will solve themselves.

Traditionalist and Reactionary Tendencies. One of the most disturbing aspects of Illich's thought is his apparent tendencies toward the sort of gender essentialism and eugenicism usually associated with ideologies like primitivism or the "crunchy con" varieties of traditionalist conservatism.

In *Tools for Conviviality*, he complains: "Enforced obsolescence threatens the right to tradition: the recourse to precedent in language, myth, morals, and judgment."[69] Terms like "tradition" and "precedent in... morals," admittedly, are general enough to leave considerable latitude for specific content. But it doesn't help that in the same work he seemingly goes beyond the politics of Silvia Federici in recognizing the dignity of domestic work, and hints at some sort of normative gendered division of labor based on a complementarian view of the gender binary.

> The effective recognition that not two but several equally valuable, dignified, and important modes of production must coexist within any viable

[68] *Ibid.*, p. 90.

[69] Illich, *Tools for Conviviality*, p. 48.

> society would bring industrial expansion under control. 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.[70]

At times Illich's comments seem reasonable, or almost so — as when he compares the gender roles of women in the subsistence household to the kind of housework that exists under industrial capitalism. In 1810...

> Women were as active in the creation of domestic self-sufficiency as were men. They brought home about the same salaries. They still were, economically, men's equals.... This picture had changed by 1830.... The woman, formerly the mistress of a household that provided sustenance for the family, now became the guardian of a place where children stayed before they began to work, where the husband rested, and where his income was spent.[71]
>
> Shadow work and wage labor came into existence together. Both alienate equally, though they do so in profoundly different ways. Bondage to shadow work was first achieved primarily through economic sex-coupling.[72] "...[Q]uite abruptly during the nineteenth century, the gendered assignment of household tasks was replaced by the *economic* division of wage and shadow work...."[73]

But even here, the seemingly reasonable analysis inevitably shades into full-blown gender complementarianism:

> An industrial society cannot exist unless it imposes certain unisex assumptions: the assumption that both sexes are made for the same work, perceive the same reality, and have, with some minor cosmetic variations, the same needs.[74]

What Illich regards as the natural, non-sexist gendered division of labor is possible only in an economy where the family and household are a productive unit. Once the cash nexus and wage labor dominate, the woman's household labor will inevitably be denigrated in comparison to the "real" — i.e. productive of exchange value — labor of the man, and her reproductive labor will be subsumed as an auxiliary function that exists only to facilitate the man's wage labor.

And the women who do participate in the wage system continue to suffer sexist discrimination, in the face of all attempted reforms.[75]

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[70] *Ibid.*, p. 73.
[71] Illich, "Shadow Work," *Shadow Work*, p. 112.
[72] *Ibid.*, p. 113.
[73] Illich, *Gender* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), p. 103.
[74] *Ibid*, p. 9.
[75] *Ibid*, p. 128.

In fact Illich idealizes the alleged non-sexism of the pre-capitalist period to an extent that resembles favorable comparisons of slaves' standard of living to that of wage-workers: "*Economic* discrimination against women cannot exist without the abolition of gender and the social construction of sex."[76] Thus, his solution to the sexism which inevitably appears under the unnatural conditions of capitalism ("economic growth is intrinsically and irremediably gender-destructive, that is, sexist"[77]) is to return to a complementarian approach to the gendered division of labor. "...[T]he decline of sexism requires as a necessary, albeit insufficient, condition the contraction of the cash nexus and the expansion of non-market-related, non-economic forms of subsistence."[78]

Illich resorts to a number of analogies to describe gender roles, in a non-waged society of production for subsistence. "What we perceive as men and what we perceive as women can meet and fit not only because but in spite of the unique contrast between them. They fit like the right fits the left." He goes on to compare the relation between these roles in various cultures to that between the prescribed tasks for right and left hand from one culture to the next, or to yin and yang.[79]

> Outside industrial societies, unisex work is the rare exception, if it exists at all. Few things can be done by women and also by men. The latter, as a rule, just cannot do women's work.[80]
>
> [Gender] bespeaks a social polarity that is fundamental and in no two places the same. What a man cannot or must do is different from valley to valley.[81]
>
> Tools are intrinsic to social relationships. Each person relates to society through actions and the tools effectively mastered to carry out those actions. To the degree that one actively masters one's tools, their shape determines his/her self-image. In all pre-industrial societies, a set of gender-specific tasks is reflected in a set of gender-specific tools. Even tools that are there for *common* use can be touched by only half the people.... Separate toolkits determine the material complementarity of life.[82]

In this last, he essentializes traditional gender roles in pre-capitalist society to the point of parody — implying that men have a psychic block almost to the virtual point of physical

incapacity of doing a bit of "woman's work" under even the most extraordinary of circumstances, and vice versa. I wonder if some people were having him on a bit, as some Samoan women did with Margaret Mead.

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[76] *Ibid*, p. 13.
[77] *Ibid*, p. 14.
[78] *Ibid*, pp. 14-15.
[79] *Ibid*, pp. 70-73.
[80] *Ibid*, p. 67.
[81] *Ibid*, p. 68.
[82] *Ibid*, p. 90.

> When, from infancy, men and women grasp the world from complementary sides, they develop two distinct models with which they conceptualize the universe. A gender-bound style of perception corresponds to each gender's domain of tools and tasks. Not only do they see the same things from different perspectives and different hues, but early on they learn that there is always another side to a thing.[83]

Illich's treatment of medical issues can be even more disturbing. Some of his critique of the cost of medical treatment, to be fair, reflects not so much a eugenic concern as a question of distributive justice, when the rich have access to enormously costly treatments while the poor majority cannot afford even basic healthcare.

> We have not yet come to conceive of... a heart operation as normal healthy care.... In fact we recognize at once that... an organ transplant clinic is a scandalous plaything to justify the concentration of more doctors in Bogota....
>
> Unfortunately it is not held to be universally evident that the majority of Latin Americans cannot afford... any form of hospitalization....[84]

And he also raises legitimate questions about the value of devoting a major share of total medical expenditures to keeping people alive for a few more days hooked up to machines, rather than letting them die peacefully in their own homes.[85]

But at times it is hard to tell whether Illich is condemning modern medicine simply for extending a life of pain for a short time at an enormous expense, whether he equates old age itself beyond a certain point to poor quality of life and blames medicine for burdening society with the cost of a larger aged population, or whether he even sees a distinction between the two.

> Medicine cannot do much for illnesses associated with aging. It cannot cure cardiovascular disease, most cancers, arthritis, multiple sclerosis, or advanced cirrhosis. Some of the pain the aged suffer can sometimes be lessened. Most treatment of the old which requires professional intervention not only heightens their pain but, if it is successful, also protracts it. One is therefore surprised to discover the extent to which resources are spent on the treatment of old age. While 10 per cent of the United States population is over sixty-five, 28 per cent of healthcare expenditures are made on behalf of this minority. The old are outgrowing the remainder of the population at a rate of 3 per cent, while the per capita cost of their care is rising at a

[83] *Ibid*, pp. 22-33.

[84] Illich, "Planned Poverty: The End Result of Technical Assistance," in *Celebration of Awareness: A Call for Institutional Revolution* (Harmondsworth and New York: Penguin Books, 1971, 1973), p. 131.

[85] Illich, *Medical Nemesis*, p. 35.

> rate of 6 per cent. Gerontology takes over the GNP. This misallocation of manpower, resources, and social concern will generate unspeakable pain as demands swell and resources dry up.[86]

And elsewhere, he seems to remove all doubt, objecting to the very idea of extending life to those — "defectives," in a remarkably appalling choice of words — who would die under what he regards as "natural" conditions.

> In addition, medical practice sponsors sickness by the reinforcement of a morbid society which not only industrially preserves its defectives but breeds the therapist's client in a cybernetic way..... [Health professions] transform pain, illness, and death from a personal challenge into a technical problem and thereby expropriate the potential of people to deal with their human condition in an autonomous way.[87]

If his complaint that "defectives survive in increasing numbers and are fit only for life under institutional care" is not unambiguous eugenicism, it's hard to imagine what would qualify.[88]

The tone is much like that of fundamentalists who objected to measures for relieving pain during childbirth, on the grounds that they defied God's curse on Eve.

> Each culture was the sum of rules by which the individual came to terms with pain, sickness, and death, interpreted them, and practiced compassion toward others faced by the same threats. Each culture set up the myths, the rituals, the taboos, and the ethical standards needed to deal with the fragility of life.
>
> Cosmopolitan medical civilization denies the need for man's acceptance of these evils. Medical civilization is planned and organized to kill pain, to eliminate sickness, and to struggle against death....[89]

Illich indicts the medical profession for denying the nature of pain and death as (to some extent) inevitable facts of life, and interfering with the individual's ability to draw on their own cultural resources in coping with them realistically and giving them meaning when they are genuinely unavoidable. So far, the critique is legitimate. But in the process, he repeatedly uses language that suggests even the relief of pain and suffering when they are *not* inevitable is a moral evil, on the grounds that the endurance of suffering is ennobling.[90]

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[86] "Tantalizing Needs," in Illich, *Toward a History of Needs*, pp. 95-96.
[87] *Ibid*, pp. 93-94.
[88] Illich, *Medical Nemesis*, p. 10.
[89] "Tantalizing Needs," in Illich, *Toward a History of Needs*, p. 102.
[90] Illich, *Medical Nemesis*, pp. 44-47.

> A myriad virtues express the different aspects of fortitude that traditionally enabled people to recognize painful sensations as a challenge and to shape their own experience accordingly. Patience, forbearance, courage, resignation, selfcontrol, perseverance, and meekness each express a different coloring of the responses with which pain sensations were accepted, transformed into the experience of suffering, and endured. Duty, love, fascination, routines, prayer, and compassion were some of the means that enabled pain to be borne with dignity. Traditional cultures made everyone responsible for his own performance under the impact of bodily harm or grief. Pain was recognized as an inevitable part of the subjective reality of one's own body in which everyone constantly finds himself, and which is constantly being shaped by his conscious reactions to it. People knew that they had to heal on their own, to deal on their own with their migraine, their lameness, or their grief....
>
> Traditional cultures and technological civilization start from opposite assumptions. In every traditional culture the psychotherapy, belief systems, and drugs needed to withstand most pain are built into everyday behavior and reflect the conviction that reality is harsh and death inevitable. In the twentieth century dystopia, the necessity to bear painful reality, within or without, is interpreted as a failure of the socio-economic system, and pain is treated as an emergent contingency which must be dealt with by extraordinary interventions.[91]

His words could easily be those of John Savage denouncing the civilization of the World Controller, on the grounds that relieving pain rather than teaching to endure it cheapens human life.

It's hard to avoid the conclusion that Illich views the goals of extending life, controlling pain, or making continued living with chronic illnesses endurable — at least beyond a very limited threshold — as inherently illegitimate.

> In this way, pain has come to pose only a technical question for industrial man: What do I need to set in order to have my pain managed or killed? If the pain continues, the fault is not with the universe, God, my sins, or the devil, but with the medical system. Suffering is an expression of consumer demand for increased medical outputs. By becoming unnecessary, pain has become unbearable.... Only the recovery of the will and ability to suffer can restore health to pain.[92]

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[91] *Ibid*, pp. 46-47.

[92] "Tantalizing Needs," in Illich, *Toward a History of Needs*, p. 103.

His criterion for judging which lives are or are not worth living is a harsh one. Any attempt to prolong life with chronic illness amounts to "the managed maintenance of life on high levels of sublethal illness."[93]

Indeed he rejects as illegitimate in principle the very idea "that natural death should come only in healthy old age," or "that doctors struggle against death and keep valetudinarians healthy...."[94] And he comes disconcertingly close to the rhetorical style of contemporary COVID denialists who repudiate vaccination on the grounds that "I have an immune system":

> Health designates a process of adaptation. It is not the result of instinct, but of autonomous and live reaction to an experienced reality. It designates the ability to adapt to changing environments, to growing up and to aging, to healing when damaged, to suffering, and to the peaceful expectation of death. Health embraces the future as well, and therefore includes anguish and the inner resources to live with it.
>
> Man's consciously lived fragility, individuality, and relatedness make the experience of pain, of sickness, and of death an integral part of his life. The ability to cope with this trio autonomously is fundamental to his health.[95]

At one point he appears to indict any form of medical intervention that thwarts the workings of "nature":

> Until recently medicine attempted to enhance what occurs in nature. It fostered the tendency of wounds to heal, of blood to clot, and of bacteria to be overcome by natural immunity. Now medicine tries to engineer the dreams of reason. Oral contraceptives, for instance, are prescribed "to prevent a normal occurrence in healthy persons." Therapies induce the organism to interact with molecules or with machines in ways for which there is no precedent in evolution. Grafts involve the outright obliteration of genetically programmed immunological defenses.[96]

Illich appears to walk back a bit from his most extreme statements, and stipulate that he isn't calling for the prohibition of measures to keep the chronically ill alive:

> Finally, the deprofessionalization of medicine does not mean disregard for the special needs that people manifest at special moments of their lives: when they are born, break a leg, marry, give birth, become crippled, or face death. It only means that people have a right to live in an environment that is hospitable to them at such high points in their experience.[97]

[93] Illich, *Medical Nemesis*, p. 11.
[94] "Tantalizing Needs," in Illich, *Toward a History of Needs*, p. 106.
[95] *Ibid*, p. 109.
[96] Illich, *Medical Nemesis*, p. 13.
[97] "Tantalizing Needs," in Illich, *Toward a History of Needs*, p. 105.

But it is outweighed by the overall tenor of his discussion.

In conclusion, Illich is a rich source of original insights on the working of the state capitalist system, that can be developed further to great benefit. But they can only be of benefit if they are adopted with an eye for their problematic elements, rather than uncritically.

Notes:

> The choice between labor-intensive consumption, perhaps less inhuman, less destructive and better organized, and modern forms of subsistence is personally known to more and more people. The choice corresponds to the difference between an expanding shadow economy and the recovery of the vernacular domain. *Ibid.*

[24]"Useful Unemployment and Its Professional Enemies," in Illich, *Toward a History of Needs*, viii.

[26]Illich, "Disabling Professions," in Illich, ed., *Disabling Professions* (London: Marion Boyars, 1977), p. 33.

[43]Illich, "Disabling Professions," in Illich, ed., *Disabling Professions* (London: Marion Boyars, 1977), p. 29.

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