

# The Guardian

## Ivan Illich

**A polymath and polemicist, his greatest contribution was as an archaeologist of ideas, rather than an ideologue**

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Ivan Illich, who has died of cancer aged 76, was one of the world's great thinkers, a polymath whose output covered vast terrains. He worked in 10 languages; he was a jet-age ascetic with few possessions; he explored Asia and South America on foot; and his obligations to his many collaborators led to a constant criss-crossing of the globe in the last two decades.

Best known for his polemical writings against western institutions from the 1970s, which were easily caricatured by the right and were, equally, disdained by the left for their attacks on the welfare state, in the last 20 years of his life he became an officially forgotten, troublesome figure (like Noam Chomsky today in mainstream America). This position obscures the true importance of his contribution. His critique of modernity was founded on a deep understanding of the birth of institutions in the 13th century, a critical period in church history which enlightened all of his work, whether about gender, reading or materiality. He was far more significant as an archaeologist of ideas, someone who helped us to see the present in a truer and richer perspective, than as an ideologue.

Illich was born in Vienna into a family with Jewish, Dalmatian and Catholic roots. His was an errant life, and he never found a home again after his family had to leave Vienna in 1941. He was educated in that city and then in Florence before reading histology and crystallography at Florence University.

He decided to enter the priesthood and studied theology and philosophy at the Vatican's Gregorian University from 1943 to 1946. He started work as a priest in an Irish and Puerto Rican parish in New York, popularising the church through close contact with the Latino community and respect for their traditions. He applied these same methods on a larger scale when, in 1956, he was appointed vice-rector of the Catholic University of Puerto Rico, and later, in 1961, as founder of the Centro Intercultural de Documentación (CIDOC) at Cuernavaca in Mexico, a broad-based research centre which offered courses and briefings for missionaries arriving from North America.

The radicalism of CIDOC attracted many young North American priests, but it became a victim of its own success in a rightwing climate, and was wound up 10 years later by the consent of its members. (Illich said of its director, Valentina Borremans, that "she realised that the soul of this free, independent and powerless thinkery would have been squashed by its rising influence... [a positive] atmosphere invites the institutionalisation which will corrupt it".) By this time Illich had also resigned active duty as a priest, thereby sidestepping a potentially bitter conflict with the conservative Vatican authorities, who now opposed CIDOC.

Illich retained a lifelong base in Cuernavaca, but travelled constantly from this point on. His intellectual activity in the 1970s and 1980s focused on major institutions of the industrialised world. In seven concise, non-academic books he addressed education (Deschooling Society, 1971), technological development (Tools For Conviviality, 1973), energy, transport and economic development (Energy And Equity, 1974), medicine (Medical Nemesis, 1976) and work (The Right To Useful Unemployment And Its Professional Enemies, 1978, and Shadow Work, 1981). He analysed the corruption of institutions which, he said, ended up by performing the opposite of their original purpose. He observed the roots of this process in the institutionalisation of charity in the 13th-century church (he frequently cited the Latin maxim "corruptio optimi pessima", the corruption of the best is the worst).

His 1982 book, Gender, argued that the difference between feminine and masculine domains had been sacrificed to the idea of neutral work, capitalism creating and depending on the simplistic coupling of the male wage labourer and the woman as mother to produce new workers.

The late 1980s and 1990s saw the flowering of his interests. There was the historicity of materials (H2O And The Waters of Forgetfulness, 1985), literacy (ABC, The Alphabetisation Of The Popular Mind, 1988, co-written with Barry Sanders) and the origins of book-learning (In The Vineyard Of The Text, 1993). The latter volume was, he said, an attempt to understand the transition from the book to the computer screen through the prism of the changes in 13th-century reading practice.

In essays, papers and through the work of his collaborators, he addressed themes as diverse as the history of the gaze, friendship, hospitality, bioethics, body history (particularly with his close collaborator, the sociologist Barbara Duden) and space.

Illich lived frugally, but opened his doors to collaborators and drop-ins with great generosity, running a practically non-stop educational process which was always celebratory, open-ended and egalitarian at his final bases in Bremen, Cuernavaca and Pennsylvania.

His charisma, brilliance and spirituality were clear to anyone who encountered him; these qualities sustained him in a heroic level of activity over the last 10 years in the context of terrible suffering caused by a disfiguring cancer. Following the thesis of Medical Nemesis, he administered his own medication against the advice of doctors, who proposed a largely sedative treatment which would have rendered his work impossible.

He was able to finish a history of pain which will be published in French next year, as will his complete works. His last wish, which was to die surrounded by close collaborators amid the beginnings of a new learning centre he had planned in Bologna, was not realised.

• Ivan Illich, thinker, born September 4 1926; died December 2 2002

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