

1968: A Global Perspective

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Biographical Sketch of Ivan Illich – A Radical Critic on Institutions in the 1960s

Martina Kaller-Dietrich wrote the first academically asserted biography of Ivan Illich, published in Austria in fall 2008.¹ At its foundation are Illich's social networks, without which so much of his great work would never have eventuated. In this respect, it is the Spanish-speaking network around the *Centro Intercultural de Documentación* (=CIDOC) and the German speaking friends of Illich that form the major part of the biography. Kaller-Dietrich conducted interviews with friends and coevals of Illich and accomplished the feature with sources from CIDOC itself and historically contextualised them.

Through archive work, this biography also focuses on Illich's childhood in Europe, especially in Vienna and Italy: Ivan Illich was born in Vienna in 1926 of mixed descent—on his mother's side Sephardic Jews, on his father's, a noted Catholic Dalmatian family. He fled Austria in 1941, never to return. He studied at the Vatican's Gregoriana and participated in the intellectual circle around Jaques Maritin. After in 1951 receiving his PHD from the University of Salzburg, he went to New York and became a US citizen. He worked as a priest until 1956 being then appointed as vice rector of the Catholic Church in Puerto Rico. In 1961 he founded the famous *Centre of Intercultural Documentation* (= CIDOC) in Cuernavaca, Mexico. There was no curriculum, no grading system and no certification. Educators offered a variety of courses and students decided whether (or not) to attend. CIDOC was notable for developing a new way of learning, and more notable for actually putting it into practice, to the benefit of North American and European Catholic missionaries, Peace Corps types, and humanitarian workers preparing to work in the villages and shantytowns of Central and South America. One of his students was the nowadays Anthropology professor at UC Berkeley, Nancy Scheper-Hughes. She outlines how Illich threw down the gauntlet to convention: "At the heart of the CIDOC pedagogy was the exorcism of ethnocentrism, replaced by a sense of wonder and humility when faced with the difference of the *other*."² Out of the critical seminars at CIDOC Illich's succession of great books manifested — *The Seamy Side of Development, Energy and Equity, Deschooling Society, Celebration of Awareness, Tools for Conviviality* and *Medical Nemesis*. From his post-CIDOC years would follow *The Disabling Professions, Toward a History of Needs, Gender, ABC – The Alphabetization of the Popular Mind*, and *In the Vineyard of the Text*.

Illich's first article in the progressive US Jesuit journal *America*—published under the nom de plume Peter Canon—was highly influential to the participants in 1968 protests. In the longer term, this resulted in the connection of Illich with Peace Corps circles and the Catholic Workers Movement. In the late 1960's the famous sociologist and writer Paul Goodman became one of the most important persons in Illich's social network at the US. They first met in 1956, when Illich organized the famous *Fiesta Patronal* at the Jesuit Fordham University for the Puerto Rican community in Upper Eastside of Manhattan, Illich was to later confess that he initially did not understand Goodman's logic, but this changed with the publication of Goodman's book *Compulsory Miseducation* (1964), which expressed ideas about education similar to those that Illich would convey

¹ Kaller-Dietrich, Martina 2008: Ivan Illich (1926-2002), sein Leben, sein Denken. Verlag der Provinz: Weitra.

² Scheper-Hughes, Nancy 2001 Introduction to Ivan Illich speaking on "Reading Technologies": Wednesday, May 2, 2001 4-6 pm The Morrison Reading Room, Doe Library UC, Berkeley (=Manuscript), 2 cited from Kaller-Dietrich 2008, 163.

some years later with *Deschooling Society* (1970). During the 1970's Illich became a household name in America and was a highly demanded public person. His ability to provoke the zeitgeist was especially evident during his brief stay at UC Berkeley where he presented his book *Gender* (1982) that infuriated the University's feminists. Kaller-Dietrich pointed out that the Illich's error was not necessarily in the content of the book, but in its timing. He was disappointed by the narrow-minded criticism his book received. People who stubbornly insist that the world is becoming a better place frustrated Illich, who believed that world history provides sufficient evidence to the contrary. In the 1980ies Illich also spent longer periods of time in Japan and India. He hoped that a physical separation from the western world would enable him to better understand it. He eventually concluded that, in spite of physical distance, he could not separate himself from the West; it remained part of him.

Ivan Illich lived the end of his life mainly in Germany, where he died in 2002. In his later years, Illich did not want to be associated with any political groups and continued his researches in medieval history.