

The Ritualization of Progress—the Schooled Imagination

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to consider the power of education based on Ivan Illich's (1926 – 2002) thoughts. This article is especially based on his production in the 1970s, and presents a systematic analysis of its school and society related criticism. Illich's purpose is to show that the society is forced into a form of school and that we all are dependent on institutionalised services from professionals, in the same way that students are dependent on teachers complying with curriculum. Illich claims that not only schools but also rituals construct students' imaginations to be reliable consumers of products and services. Illich also criticises universities and modern research. He claims that in order to create a convivial future, we should take counterintuitive research seriously. Illich's production is a demand for liberation of education, preservation of autonomy, and increasing respect for independent research.

Keywords: Ivan Illich, school, consuming, curriculum, education, university

Ivan Illich (1926-2002) is one of the most critical and extensive educational theorists and practitioners in the 20th century (Finger & Asún, 2001). The present article concentrates on his criticism of the ritualization of progress by systematic analysis on his works *Celebration of Awareness. A Call for Institutional Revolution* (1970), *Deschooling Society* (1971), *Tools for Conviviality* (1973), *Energy and Equity* (1974), *Toward a History of Needs* (1977), and *The Right to Useful Unemployment and its Professional Enemies* (1978). The greatest challenge in interpreting Illich's work is that his books should not be interpreted literally but as revealers of self-evidence in society and as the pioneers of a new paradigm. Nevertheless, Illich's eclectic thinking is almost impossible to place into any separate, distinct trend. Instead two of his *contemporary witnesses* (the concept used by Hoinacki, 2002, to refer to them as experiencing the 20th century abominations), Primo Levi and Paul Celan, help situating Illich's thoughts because of these three men's ethnic origin, physical geography, and historical time. Yet, Hoinacki (2002) reminds us that Illich went further and he had to “forge

concepts to make known what he believed to be happening in the contemporary world” (p. 3). Illich has asserted that we cannot just think our way towards humanity because this way is actualized through actions. He stated: “We have to live and work, we have to set an example of the time we wish to create” (Illich, 1970). According to David Cayley (1992), Illich has been an exception among scholars because he has claimed that *the habits of the heart* are as significant to the sophistication as *the habits of the head*.

Illich’s Criticism of the School System

Illich (2004) considers learning as human action. Individuals do not learn under guidance but merely by participating autonomously in the encounters significant to themselves. In Illich’s opinion, it is problematic that teaching is carried out through the *ritualization of progress* in schools. In the present system, attendance guarantees valuable learning, and upholds the presumption that “the increase of input” will automatically increase the value of output, which means that learning is measured by degrees and certificates. There is a significant difference between education and learning. The values provided by school rituals are quantifiable, and school accustoms children to a world where everything is measurable. At the same time, they are being educated in a reality where the competition between human beings is more desirable than *personal development*. Illich defines personal development as growth in disciplined disagreement that is not measurable or comparable to others’ achievements. Instead, it is creative, surprising, and immeasurable learning (Illich, 2004). Thus *learning* and *schooling* should be understood as disparate: *education* is commodity provided by *schooling*. Several decades of trust in education has turned *knowledge* into *commodity* (Illich, 1978a).

In addition to Illich, Postman and Weingartner (1970) consider the role of the school significant as it is the only societal institution burdening everyone. Therefore, the change in schools means vicissitude either for better or worse. Postman and Weingartner (1970) also state that the school system has not realized how this accelerating change will affect our time, and that the young will need the kind of abilities and attitudes that help to control the changing concepts in the changing world.

In the name of the ritualization of progress, the school is selling industrialized curricula—the commodity collections that have been built like other commodities and which are distributed to the consumer student personally by the professional teacher. The ritualization and measurement are also being embodied by registering carefully the reactions of the final

consumer of the curriculum at the end of this educational product, in order to get research results to enhance the planning of the next model (Illich, 2004; 1978a; 1978b.) Thus, learning in schools means consuming the learning elements that are the results of studied, planned, and supported programs.

However, Illich's work can be analyzed as a part of the critical idea of education and radical education in a way that suggests that in Illich's (2004) idea, the structural changes inside school are not enough (see also Giroux, 1981). Replacing the modern schooling institution with learning nets lies behind a change that enables truly equal learning. Illich's thought typifies radical humanism (Fromm, 1970).

The idea of the in-fighting between dominant culture and sub-culture which is typical of critical pedagogy can be found in Illich's texts. Dominant culture and sub-culture do not seem to represent juxtaposition but options in Illich's thinking. Illich considers that society affects the structure of school in a way on which teachers do not have influence. Establishing such a new research paradigm that does not try to change the foci of power seems to be central in Illich's work. Illich does not encourage his readers to resistance but to world-changing *actions in everyday life*.

However, Illich does not believe that just changing the structures would be enough. Instead, he calls for *recreating the structures*. Therefore, researchers should ask what the school is based on and not aim at improving the existing schools (Illich, 1970). Changing the structures being insufficient resembles that realizing that school renews the received system still does not explain the political effect of school sufficiently (Heintz, 1975). Understanding the nature of schooling demands revealing and naming its rituals and myths, and recreating the structures on this basis.

Rituals and Myths in Education

According to Illich (2004) *the ritual of the obligatory school* praises the myth of *the eternal paradise of consumption* and renders school the only hope of *the miserable* and *the dispossessed*. This process resembles the working habits of a drudge who acts without questioning and being aware of the meaning – and could be assessed to be an essential part of the hidden curriculum at school. (Illich 2004; 1973).

The promises and phenomenology of school criticized by Illich verify the hypothesis according to which the structures and purposes of educative and consumerist society are parallel. The consumerist society defines school tasks that are in line with the purposes of educative society followed through in the process called learning. This relationship makes education serve the purposes of consumption in a way that educational and consumerist processes are impossible to distinguish in the end. According to Hart (2001), this view of the consumerist society is the core of Illich's criticism because the dialectics of the consumerist society and the educational society constitute a ring pandering to each other and maintained by the status quo situation between the poor and the rich. Especially interesting and provocative for society-related criticism is that the school structure is similar in all developed industrial countries regardless of the different social systems. The school perpetuates the endless myth of consumption—to belief that development inevitably produces something valuable (Illich 1973; 2004).

As the result of curriculum, *successful learning* is often bound to some other task not related to learning, and thus the school does not encourage the experimental use of talents. According to Illich (2004), most people learn best through tasks, but since school teaching is a result of careful planning, learning is hardly ever experimental or unforeseen. Illich (2004) regards guidance as problematic since it blurs the scenes of a human beings' own imagination and possibilities. Not only is the curriculum a societal ritual but also a sign of social valuation and status. Schooling has mirrored various ruling class priorities and needs to stratify, socialize, and control populations (see Naylor, 2010). Education would be an effective way to go against the colonization of the mind and heart, the coloniality of power (McLaren, 2012). Mohanty (1994) refers to implementing uncolonized pedagogy, a pedagogy that does not carry the dominating culture as given, but requires taking various cultural logics seriously. Indeed, Illich states that the school is meant to offer people equal possibilities to learn regardless of their background but in its present form, it follows the values of a consumerist society. Illich (1978a; 1973) claims that the hidden curriculum defines upbringing and consumption levels, which produce the appearance of two kinds of social slaves—the slaves of addiction and envy.

Illich thinks that competence should be evaluated separately from education, and that previous education should not be a reason for discrimination. Schooling for the consumerist society is manifested also by schools acting like market places with annually changing offers

and models (Illich, 2004). Illich (1978a) estimates that the school itself is an outdated product and that as long as learning occurs within compulsory education—in a classroom under a teacher’s guidance—school educates students to be consumers. Postman and Weingartner (1970) argue the fundamental task of school is to “raise eager consumers, consign thoughts, values, and information that died three minutes ago, and raise smoothly operating bureaucrats” (p. 27). Only notable structural changes can alter the role of school as ritualizer of progress (Illich, 1978a; 2004). According to Illich (2004), understanding the crisis of education demands consideration of the basic idea of common teaching more than of the methods used to teach.

The problem of Illich’s work is the lack of academic credibility due to the lack of empirical research that would support his theory, especially the one about the phenomenology of school system. Willis (1984) implemented an empirical research that aimed at finding out whether the model of school needed to be improved. It has also been the goal of Illich’s criticism towards school system. No doubt, there would be need for research that would test Illich’s theory and that would, at the same time, verify the uniformity of world-wide competition in schooling and consumer culture that Illich has represented.

Socialized and Schooled as Consumers

The present school system also educates social control (Illich, 1978a). The consumerist culture is a significant factor in the socialization process and the consumerist fantasy turns into a life style (Halton, 1997). In the end, no one will graduate within this kind of development. *The school does not close its doors without offering one more chance: remedial, adult, and post-graduate education.* The school makes the unschooled feel guilty. In this way, school enforces its position as consecration and atonement ritual. At the same time, children are being educated to believe in better changes in the future, promised by education (Illich, 2004). As a target for continuing development, *the ritualization of progress* is the development of consumerist society. Illich (2004) notes that consumer-students are being schooled to adjust their desires to market values at schools, and “they are set feeling guilty if they don’t achieve the grades and certificates expected, and won’t later take the positions to which they are expected to belong according to the predictions of consumerist research” (Illich 2004, p. 41). In line with Illich, Althusser (1984) asserts that the school teaches everyone skills and norms suitable to their status. This results in the inter-school competition of superiority where the objectives of learning and teaching become uniform and

educational products comparable and measurable. Indeed, Illich (2004) has specifically stated in his criticism that the economic barometers are not applicable in the social sector.

When explaining the process of education becoming a commodity, Illich (1978a) emphasizes that the hidden curriculum turns learning into a commodity that the school monopolizes in its markets. The curriculum is “a commodity being that appealing that it enables its mass selling in order to cover the production costs” (Illich, 2004, p. 41). This commodity is called education. Belief in knowledge and the fact that surviving without knowledge is impossible prevails in every educated country. At the same time, knowledge has turned into a currency even more valuable than money (Illich 1978a). Behind the criticism of the school system lays a presumption that as long as the school demands attendance, gradual progress, and evaluation by authority, it puts students into a competitive position. As a result, changes in the school remain ineffective. Illich’s criticism of the school system concentrates on the phenomenology of the school, which results in the authority power of teachers and the schools’ monopoly of educational services. Criticism of the school system forms a central part of the concept of modernized poverty, because the monopolies that specialize in well-being set standards for values and thus produce modernized poverty (Illich 2004). Illich’s idea of consumer culture is quite well in line with Marcuse’s (1991; 2000) thoughts regarding people’s idea of freedom, in advanced industrial society, changing under the pressure of modern technology.

Revealing Myths of the University

Together with his criticism towards the school system, Illich criticised the university and its exclusive right to define social status. Illich (2004) thinks that *the modern university* allows *individual and different opinion* to those who have been *rated as possible money makers or power holders*. The university has a monopoly on the learning resources allotted in the study apparatus for students tested in the right order. Thus, the schools offer graduation possibilities only for students proved to successfully maintain the established order and schooled imagination. In turn, the selection of students supports and confirms the substantial inequality within the school ritual. (Illich, 2004.)

Illich especially criticizes the fact that the university tends to serve the interests of the already privileged. At the same time, the university has failed in arranging encounters that are simultaneously planned and indiscriminate. Therefore, the university has started to lead a

process of producing research that makes different countries compete with each other for its efficiency (Illich, 2004). For example, from the point of view of this kind of efficiency demand, academic discourse does not appear to have an aspiring value, although it has a significant academic *utility value* in reality. According to Illich, university change should be driven by avoidance of imperative indoctrination. The intention to influence students' way of handling things typifies indoctrination at the university. The strict borders of disciplines and obligations exemplify the way the student is indoctrinated to think only within the limits of his/her own discipline.

The most dramatic manifestation of the myth of university is the research becoming more and more one-sided and foreseeable. When learning and studying are measured with the economic barometers, it is sure that the studies are bound in those themes that produce predictable information that especially appeals to financiers. In order to avoid research withering away in this way, Illich (2004) has proposed the idea of counter research that he calls *counterfoil research*. This kind of research originates in totally new perspectives compared to the old paradigm and institutions.

Universities and a Demand on Counterfoil Research

Illich (1978a) thinks that the present research produced by the university should expand. He makes a claims for alternative research—*counterfoil research for the pre-packed research problems*. Actually, there is a need for research on how the society could offer education equally for all regardless of age and previous studies. According to Illich, the importance of this counterfoil research would be remarkable for the third world but the future of the developed industrial countries will also be dependent on the significance of counter research to enabling meaningful life.

Counterfoil research does not pursue changing the focuses of societal development, such as equal educational opportunities, but finding a meaningful balance. Thus, counterfoil research is not any new research paradigm but it addresses research problems from a new point of view: “It aims at analyzing people’s relationship with tools in a multidimensional manner” (Illich, 1973, p. 77–78). The purpose is to define the critical limit and reasonable scarcity of a research theme, such as the use of energy (Illich, 1979). Therefore, counterfoil research can be defined as research where the phrasing of a question pursues the realization of world-wide equality.

Illich (1978a) understands the problems of the counterfoil research he demands. First, the researcher has to question something that everyone considers true. Second, the research challenge is to persuade the powers to accept more far-reaching goals than before instead of short-sighted profit seeking. Illich (1974/2003) stated in *Medical Nemesis* that “Current research is overwhelmingly oriented towards unattainable ‘breakthroughs.’ What I have called counterfoil research is the disciplined analysis of the levels at which such reverberations must inevitably damage man” (p. 921). An individual researcher has to cope in the world that he or she intends to change by his or her research, regardless of the fact that *the colleagues who are part of the privileged minority* are of the opinion that this research intends to destroy the background and reality on which our whole life is based (Illich, 1978a). By *the privileged minority* Illich means the majority working at the university—those who do not question prevailing practices or contribute to the new research paradigm through their actions.

It is important to recognize the research on which prevailing institutions spend great amounts of money to market their own products. Already in the 1970s, Illich worried about the tendency in which research is led and left to wither according to the economy. As a result of this tendency, the funds are channeled to research only if it increases consumerist habits and the power of professionals (Illich, 1978a; 1978b). There is a danger that economical influence focuses interest on research questions defined within the familiar paradigm in order to get easily measurable research results. This influence is a result of the industrialized production of education and shows especially in the industrialization of research. In other words, economics influences the phrasing of questions aiming at technological development, increasing consumption, and fortifying the power of professionals.

Therefore, Illich has striven for research with re-designed research frames (Illich, 1978a; 1979; 2004). The fact that the research on schools and the phenomenology of schools has not changed the school structures is evidence of the need to renew the research frame. Instead, the research that will change the school structures has to start from questioning the whole institution. In order to understand school as a phenomenon, we have to understand the environment, the society that makes school a school. Therefore, educational research trends and arrangements should be unsettled and researchers should seek new and surprising questions.

Illich (2004) blames the university for offering its services to those who have already adopted the consumerist society. According to Illich (2004), “Others recognize the monopoly of schools over the resources which they need to build a counter society. They seek support from each other to live with integrity while submitting to the academic ritual” (p. 36). One sign of a schooled imagination is that the bigger price one has paid to get into the elite, the more one is opposed to dissolving the power of professionals. Only a few want to admit that they have made a bad deal; losing autonomy has been a high price for having a professional position. According to Illich, the university should offer *the means for meaningful life* by enabling independent, creative, and conscious learning. The university should become a community of the people who have not paid so much for their position that they feel obliged to repeat the experience and transmit the academically *schooled imagination* as the only form of university-level education. Giroux (2007) has urged intellectuals to step out from the lecture halls. This demand includes also the thought that higher education should be part of *the public sphere*, thus enabling societal influence. According to Giroux (2007), “students should learn to take intellectual risks and responsibility for their own ideas as well as to develop respect for dissimilarity” (p. 12).

Illich’s educational ideas have not remained just a utopian presented in his work *Deschooling Society* as he implemented his idea in practice in CIDOC institution in Mexico. It was a learning centre of free information and skills, and the operation of the centre was based on Illich’s thoughts (Finger & Asún, 2001). In addition and according to his idea of the new research paradigm, Illich (2004) has planned learning Webs where learning is not time-, place-, or curriculum-bound – nor is learning conditional on age and previous studies. These learning Webs are to present a model of educational society where learning and encountering are autonomous events. Illich’s (2004) purpose has been to show the opposite of school is possible and that independent learning can occur instead of hiring teachers to bribe or force students to study. According to Illich (2004), the problem is that not only education is schooled, but the whole social reality. Therefore, also society needs “deschooling: Educational change and encountering with other learners seem frightening as school has given us fear that makes us discriminating” (Illich, 2004, p. 18). One central idea in Illich’s utopian would be freedom; no one would be obliged to continue the encounter. New educational relationship strives for change where focuses on appreciation would change; therefore, turning to educational society would change the following matters:

- *enrichment of meaning is more valuable than of structures* – the habits of the heart are more significant than rituals
- *the unpredictable result of individually chosen personal encounter is more valuable than professional teaching* – to increase the appreciation of autonomous choices and self-access learning.

Illich (2004) believes that this new trend would result in personal surprise and human being's liberation from institutionally-chosen values. Furthermore, this relates to the message from Illich's criticism towards school system since preserving an individual's autonomy lies in the centre of forging an independent and hopeful life.

The precondition for educational change and for a new research paradigm is to understand the relationship between school and its environment. Thus, in order to create a new educational relationship, it would be necessary to understand the changing world and the threat that social changes produce as well as the challenges resulting from financial and technological development. We are not able to affect schools and education taking place at schools until we ask: what makes school a school? Illich (2004) claims that the renewal of educational relationships essentially depends on the new research paradigm. In addition Illich (2004) proposes that "every one of us is responsible for freeing ourselves from school and that only we have power to do it" (p. 47). What would there be instead of schools and how would it be possible to build a whole new school system? And furthermore what kind of school system would enable individuals to grow into autonomy and freedom? According to Illich (1970) in order to achieve this kind of change, we should "live the future and stop using dictatorship and authorities as well as reject the rationalisation of bureaucratic machinery by changing the focuses of forces" (p. 17).

Discussion

In addition to his critique, *the hope* in human beings and the thought of how people can create space for an autonomous life by their actions could be pointed out in Illich's work. Striving for *the meaningful life* is challenging, however, because if one has adopted the role of a consumer it is impossible to manage without services offered by the professionals. In this kind of society, people appreciate professional services more than the ones offered by neighbors (Illich 1978a, 2004). Illich (2004) thinks that the repairing change in power structures is not enough. Freeing from modernized poverty requires recognition and revealing

of prevailing structures. Illich believes that a human being can escape from this dehumanizing system and that one's freedom depends on one's willingness to take responsibility for the future. According to Illich, the schooling of the imagination starts at schools and concerns both teachers and students. The purpose of Illich's criticism is to reveal prevailing disadvantages and the reasons for people being unable to react politically. Illich thinks that the secrecy of these reasons maintains their power over people.

Illich (2004) estimates that the actual renewal of learning cannot be started until people understand that the school ritual does not enhance personal learning and societal equality. The renewal of society presumes understanding the meaning of obligatory education as a definer of the structure of consumerist society. Therefore, revealing the myths in the university will not be enough because it is a part of the surrounding system. Illich (2004) tells of a group that is aware of the monopoly of the universities and is trying to break free from it—people who understand that the university needs educational liberation as its role has changed. Nevertheless, Illich (2004) emphasizes that “a generation that has lived free of obligatory schools, can create a new university” (p. 39). However, the main question is: does a *free-grown* or *deschooled* generation need a university? This question, because it is *against the common thinking* and models the counter research, holds the possibility to start a conversation that produces new information on the role and purpose of education.

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