

The theory of 'de-schooling' between paradox and utopianism

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Freedom of education and compulsory schooling. Or, better still, compulsory schooling and freedom of education, for that salutary tyranny is of even greater value than such freedom.—José Martí (Cuba, 1853–95).

The theory of 'de-schooling society' and of 'disestablishing school' is not—particularly as regards the latter aspect—entirely new, neither does it find its only expression¹ in the thinking of Ivan Illich and his co-author, Everett Reimer.²

Nevertheless they are—Illich in particular—held to be the most explicit and coherent exponents of the doctrine. As this is undoubtedly true, it is on them that my study will be focused.

Context of the theory

The contradictions and hesitations to be observed in many current trends of thought about the times we live in, society, man and education (which amounts, after all, to one single, complex topic for reflection) are perfectly easy to explain. They correspond to the factual contradictions in certain social, economic and political systems which exist today and are marked by the alienation of their protagonists. The result is bound to be the constant challenging of all aspects of

1. See the interesting anthology by K. W. Richmond and Mauro Laeng, *La Descolorizzazione nell'era Tecnologica*, Rome, Armando, 1973.

2. Illich himself admits that he owes his interest in public education to Reimer as a result of their meeting in Puerto Rico in 1958. This gave rise to a fruitful dialogue extending over thirteen years, at the end of which each decided to publish his views separately: Illich in *Deschooling Society* and Reimer in *School is Dead: Alternatives in Education*, published in 1971.

See also *Prospects*, Vol. II, No. 1, p. 48 for an article by Reimer entitled 'Freeing Educational Resources', and the review of *School is Dead*... in Vol. III, No. 1, p. 130.—Ed.

human life, including education, which has been rocked to its foundations in recent years by a universal urge to reform or transform it.

The interesting study on 'the world of education today and tomorrow' carried out by an international commission of experts under the chairmanship of Edgar Faure (France), as part of Unesco's Programme¹ points to four trends among present movements towards educational change. There is, first, the reform movement, interpreted in the pejorative and already fairly usual sense of the term, which hardly goes further than the superficial changing of existing educational structures or their mere 'modernization'. Secondly, there are 'structural transformations', typical of those countries which have recently 'gone through social and political upheavals' leading to the establishment of 'close ties between schools and their milieu', between 'studying and living'. Thirdly, there is 'radical criticism' which, according to the Faure Report, is characteristic of the 'proponents of *de-institutionalizing* education and *de-schooling* society'; and fourthly, 'dissent', represented by the active protest of the users of the educational system themselves, striking examples of which are the notable events in France in May 1968 or the movement that began fifty years ago in the Argentine city of Córdoba and which extended throughout the whole of Latin America.

At the two extremes of the trends outlined above are mere modernization along development lines and rebellion against the establishment which, in its purest forms, is a revolutionary movement, since it involves disbelief in the possibility of changing educational institutions in the absence of a substantial transformation of the social and economic context. Between these two extremes come the so-called 'structural transformations', already preceded by revolutionary processes (as in the socialist countries and some of the so-called 'Third World countries'), and the 'de-schooling' doctrine which, although not having gone beyond 'intellectual speculation', to quote textually from a passage in the Faure Report referring to Illich's ideas, is regarded by its authors and followers as revolutionary. At the moment, it is seen as a kind of Utopia which, as such, warrants analysis to determine if it really amounts to a design for Utopia with profound significance as a factor for liberation and a certain degree of viability or if, on the contrary, it is mere Utopianism, i.e. a self-sufficing theory which is not concerned with actual implementation in a specific space

1. This report was published under the title *Learning to Be*, Paris and London, Unesco and Harrap, 1972.

and a specific time, as, for example, Latin American space and time. I mention this because the theory arose and was developed in Latin America, although in fact the 'prophet of Cuernavaca' has written all his books in English for initial publication in the United States of America and, apart from occasional articles, his works have still not been translated into Latin American languages.¹

Paradox in style and thinking

It is not enough to class the ideas of Illich, or those of Reimer, among other challenges to education or to speculate as to the feasibility of their proposals. We have also to understand as clearly as possible the set of hypothesis and alternatives on and with which they build their 'system'.

The search for clarity is inevitable, for Illich is not always easy to read. Reimer expresses himself more clearly and his approach is more realistic, particularly in setting out the political problems. Illich's style, on the other hand, is hard going and following it is often like stepping from sunlit country into a dark cave or turning from a soundly based, evocative concept to a superficial argument which simple common sense can demolish. His thinking is, at times, strictly logical and balanced whilst, at others, it is contradictory and even inconsistent. It is then that we have the feeling that this contradiction is deliberate or something like a demonstration *ab absurdo*. Or a trap into which we fall, lured by a conception devised by a subtle mind and based on sound reasoning and argument which lead to certain solutions that only dispassionate, rigorous criticism can show to be deceptive.

How can we explain the structure of Illich's thinking and his style?

1. One of Illich's books has, however, been published very recently in Spanish. This book is *Tools for Conviviality*, New York, Harper & Row, 1975, published under the title of *La Convivialidad*, Madrid, Barral, 1974; the French version appears as *La Convivialité*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1973. To the best of my knowledge, occasional articles by Illich have been published in Spanish, such as 'El Derrumbe de la Escuela: Un Problema o un Síntoma?', *Revista de Ciencias de la Educación* (Buenos Aires), No. 7, April 1972, and 'El Capitalismo del Saber', I. Illich, H. Forcade and G. F. J. Cirigliano (eds.), *Juicio a la Escuela*, Buenos Aires, Humanitas, 1973. Several short works by Illich have been compiled in a small volume entitled: *En América Latina, para que Sirve la Escuela?*, Buenos Aires, Ediciones Búsqueda, 1973. The work by Reimer already referred to is translated into Spanish: *La Escuela ha Muerto: Alternativas en Educación*, trans. by C. Mayans, Madrid, Barral, 1973. Other books by Illich are the aforesaid *Deschooling Society: Une Société sans École*, French trans. by G. Durand, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1971; *Celebration of Awareness: Libérer l'Avenir*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1971.

Only one reply fits: the contradictions and inconsistencies lie in his own doctrine because, in the face of paradoxical and profoundly complex situations, he sees the conflicts clearly but lacks the same perspicacity in finding more realistic solutions for an environment in which he himself is living. Here lies the main paradox in that his tremendous critical power peters out in the weakness of the solutions that he manages to propose. Illich and Reimer cannot be fully understood unless we go back to the source of their ideas. The de-schooling 'system' rests on a kind of experimental theory that, at its own convenience, expands and contracts in the never-ending process of being carried to its ultimate conclusions, whether this is done by its creators or by means of discussion and consultation with others in the 'convivial' climate of the peaceful monastery of Cuernavaca.

There is still something more. The architecture of the de-schooling doctrine makes it very difficult to separate the objective statement of its principles from criticism of them. Illich's works, like Reimer's—because of the burning question they deal with and the methodological style in which they discuss it—compel us to agree or disagree with them, without waiting to read them right through. Like all creators—it does not matter whether one agrees with their theory or not—these authors compose and recompose a central 'melody' which is repeated, expanded, condensed or elaborated within the whole orchestra or is distributed among solo instruments.

The core of the 'de-schooling' theory

This fundamental theme of Illich's theory is the challenging of obligatory schooling, applied both to the noun (schooling) and the adjective (obligatory), although the latter assumes a stronger meaning as a noun (obligatoriness).

Illich and Reimer see 'teaching' as the opposite of 'learning'. The former is no more than instruction and has very little or nothing to do with genuine 'education', a principle supported, incidentally—although not in such absolute form, but through a dialectical interpretation that gives each process its corresponding place in the larger process of the moulding of man—by educational science since the beginning of the century. Illich holds the view that—contrary to school education which institutionalizes human values, turns them into mythology and transforms them into graded, measurable objects—education is what tends to produce 'immeasurable re-creation'.

Riemer, in *School is Dead* . . . , opts for Freire's concept, for whom education is the process that enables man 'to become critically aware of his reality as a person, so that he can exert an effective influence on it'.¹

These concepts—basically unobjectionable—lend support to a negative acceptance of education, only because it does not imply the related process of learning but because it has become 'institutionalized' in the school. Thus the prime categories of the 'de-schooling theory' emerge: *schooling* and *obligatoriness*, the real features that account for all the alienating aspects of contemporary society, 'ideologies' sustaining the discriminatory consumer society, which finds in them the most effective guarantee for its preservation and reproduction.

The key lies, then, in the 'institutionalization' of values, in their replacement by 'services', bringing about the confusion of teaching with learning, the belief that grade advancement is education, that a diploma means competence, and fluency the ability to say something new. Thus all institutions are open to attack for determining the measurability of values, their 'ossification' process and their concealment. We have here the basis of an alienation which, according to Illich, leads automatically to a situation where '*medical treatment is mistaken for health care*, social work for the improvement of community life, police protection for safety, military poise for national security, and the rat race for productive work'.²

As a result, 'institutional assistance increases dependence and the real community is forgotten', the school being the 'paradigm' of alienating and repressive institutions. Nevertheless—still according to Illich's thesis—and despite the fact that many individuals are aware of the function of the 'hidden curriculum of schooling' (*El derrumbe de la escuela*), all countries whether developed or not, rich or poor, capitalist or socialist, retain their faith in it, in compulsory schooling, that real 'sacred cow',³ as the expression of a 'new World Church', outside which there is 'no salvation' (*El capitalismo del saber*). School sustains the 'social myth because of its structure as a ritual game of graded promotions' and, Illich continues, in *Deschooling Society*, 'introduction into this gambling ritual is much more important than what or how something is taught'. And in this 'ritual game', a reproductive and deforming process, man gradually

1. Translator's note: free translation, Reimer's book not being available.

2. Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society*, op. cit.

3. Ivan Illich, *Celebration of Awareness*, op. cit.

loses his freedom to be himself, becoming a 'customer' or a 'producer'.

It is extremely difficult not to agree with some of the arguments of Illich or Reimer in favour of greater individual freedom, denied by the rigidity of certain social structures. But this means that we have to exercise greater care in regard to the traps that are set for us, such as the quotation underlined above which seeks to make us think that to mistake medical treatment for health care is the same thing as to confuse personal safety with the police. . . . Although in justifying certain ideas, inconceivable in this day and age and in our countries, Illich himself, it might be said, has also fallen into his own traps. This is what seems to have happened when he lets himself get carried away by a 'go-it-alone' conception of education, expressed disconcertingly in these terms 'the student will have to safeguard his freedom without giving society any guarantee as to what skill he will acquire; he decides for himself. Each individual should be given the right to educational privacy, in the hope that he will assume the responsibility of helping others to develop in their own unique way [sic]' (*El derrumbe de la escuela*).

A rejection with inherent limits

I repeat: traps apart, it is extremely difficult to object to the pitiless X-ray that Illich and Reimer have taken of the consumer society, and the need to give a new creative sense to the concept of education, both *in* and out of school.

But when, equally mercilessly, their over-all theory is subjected to coherent, rigorous criticism, the inconsistencies begin to appear, if not in their own opinions, at least in relation to reality, and we recognize the limits of their rejections. According to the views of Herbert Gintis (considered by Illich as one of the best critics of his work) the greatest force of the Illich theory lies 'in its method of coherent, general rejection'. 'The basic elements of the liberal notion of "success"', the Harvard professor goes on, 'consumption and education, the manipulation of companies and the "Welfare State" are demythologized and unmasked in the light of this critical, rejecting doctrine. But Illich's failure is logically linked with his refusal to go beyond these rejections so as to arrive at a synthesis at another level'.¹

And indeed, Illich carries out a kind of 'aerial' reconnaissance of

1. In *Cahiers pédagogiques*, p. 16-17, Paris, December 1972.

society at which he launches his missiles, but from such distant points that he cannot distinguish the subtle differences in its geography. Obsessed by his principles, he cannot visualize different societies or the possibility of changing existing ones. He takes history from scratch, without considering the efforts of some peoples to create new structures tailored to man's needs. He likewise—as shown above—takes education science from scratch. He thus enlarges the trap, lumping together traditional schooling and new educational trends, some of which have been based on revolutionary theories concerning the destiny of the human race.

There is a marked projection phenomenon in his identification of the school with the Church. Having himself entered the Church, and subsequently escaped from its rigid ritual, he assigns to other institutions the role that the Church has fulfilled throughout the centuries. This identification is responsible for a distortion of the terms and of what they actually represent, and makes it possible for some of his followers to establish an automatic link between Church and school, between the 'road to salvation' that the 'Catholic' universal Church offers, and that provided by compulsory schooling, which is also universal; between 'the theology that sanctifies the way to eternity' and the 'education sciences, pseudo-theological, that sanctify entry to the consumer society'; between 'catechism' and 'school books and materials'.¹ These curious analogies, which are something more than mere observations, call for certain questions which even the most unwary reader is liable to pose. We may ask, *inter alia*, if Church and school have played the same role, historically speaking. Is it a bad thing that the school is within the reach of all people, and that it should be, or try to be, universal? Is the fight against ignorance doomed? Are catechism manuals and school textbooks one and the same thing? Is being a 'faithful believer' the same thing as being a 'pupil' or 'student'?

And all this ends up in perennialism', in metaphysical substantialism, disregarding the actual history of mankind, or in the most aberrant individual theories. For, as Jean Pérocaud points out very shrewdly: 'Equality, according to Illich, consists in giving equal protection to the differences of individuals who are naturally different, i.e., unequal. His postulate is that man exists as an autonomous individual, and that this autonomy is predetermined.'² This criticism

1. These parallels are drawn in *La Escolaridad en Juiciada*, by Gustavo F. J. Cirigliano, in: Cirigliano, Forcade and Illich: op. cit., p. 86-7.

2. 'Illich = Maurras + Aristotle', in *Cahiers Pédagogiques*, op. cit., p. 15.

calls Rousseau to mind, not in order to identify him with Illich but, precisely, to distinguish him from the latter. The 'individual' visualized by the great Genevese, flees from a deformed society, but Rousseau points the way to a new society, which was outlined in his *Contrat Social* and proved to be revolutionary. Or could it be that Illich's objective is 'a school without society'?¹

A pedagogical doctrine without pedagogy

Criticism of 'schooling' and of the myth of compulsory competitive curricular consumption, showed the Cuernavaca group the need for 'de-schooling society' on the basis of the 'disestablishment of school'. This is the revolution that is postulated, which would, for both Illich and Reimer, mean the 'secularization' of education and the learning process, a return to emphasis on what is being learnt and the way in which it is being learnt, and a break-away from the transfer of control from one man to another and, ultimately, to institutions.

Both thinkers are aware of the difficulties of the abrupt transition from a society 'subjected' to schooling to another 'liberated' from the 'competitive ideology'. But gradually disentangling the web of solutions, other key ideas in the de-schooling theory emerge which end in the conviction that the answer to the crisis and the way to overcome it lie not in the *transformation* of society but in its *de-schooling*. Unexpectedly (although not so surprisingly) the Cuernavaca anti-pedagogues find themselves at the centre of an absolute pedagogical doctrine that ordinary modest educationists (aware of the relativities of their discipline but also of its potentialities) would not dare even to suggest.

The relationship between education and society can be interpreted in two ways: either education accompanies and affirms social changes, or it determines them. The upholders of de-schooling are certainly convinced of the latter. Reimer states in *School is Dead*. . . : 'Present social structures will succumb to an educated population, although the students may represent only a substantial minority.' Illich, in *Deschooling Society*, with greater emphasis says that 'In a basic sense, schools have ceased to be dependent on the ideology professed by any government or market organization. Other basic institutions might

1. This question comes from the telling title of R. Hanoum's book: *Ivan Illich ou l'École sans Société*, Paris, Éditions ESF, 1973.

differ from one country to another . . . but everywhere the school system has the same structure and everywhere its hidden curriculum has the same effect.' Other solutions having been set aside, education becomes 'an independent variable, a causal element in society'.¹

Does the school 'manufacture' people's age-groups?

Educational determinism does not confine itself to the creation of society on the basis of education but makes the school responsible for differences between stages in the achievement of man's biological and mental maturity.

Illich defines the school as an 'age-specific' teacher-related process requiring full-time attendance at an obligatory curriculum. In attempting to explain this idea, Illich introduces another of the key notions of his doctrine—the inseparable link between the school and the grouping of people by age. This does not mean, for our author, something that is logical and consonant with one of the basic principles of schooling, which is the gradual development of the capacity for assimilating and understanding culture, progressing parallel to the growing complexity of culture itself. He uses this notion in *Deschooling Society* to launch an attack on three premises which, in his opinion, testify to the negativity of teaching institutions: (a) 'Children belong in school'; (b) 'Children learn in school'; (c) 'Children can be taught only in school'.

Again the technique of disregard for the history of educational theory and of the educational disciplines. No self-respecting educationist can assert that the individual is fashioned only in school, just as he cannot fail to realize that there is a dialectical link between formal education, non-formal, and informal or functional instruction. And all this without reckoning with the undeniable fact that although institutionalized education responds to society's needs for survival, it also caters for the needs of the individual by providing him with the basic knowledge for lifelong development. In this dual *reproductive* and *protective* role of educational institutions lies their poverty but also their greatness or, rather, one of the main vindications of their legitimacy. Whatever the society, education is primarily adaptation, not simply because the social system seeks to reproduce itself (reproduction that is never a 'facsimile' for, if this were so, mankind would

1. *Learning to Be*, op. cit., p. 20, footnote 5.

not have made a single step forward) but because if the individual failed to achieve integration, even to a minor extent, with the social group, he could not subsist and any theory concerning education as 'an immeasurable re-creation' would be completely futile. . . . To take an example which is self-evident to the point of being scarcely worth mentioning, the process of bringing up children (food, shelter, assistance, care) is based on social standards that vary from one epoch to another and from one country to another. Should this protection of the child be interpreted as another kind of 'compulsory ideology', not of a *competitive* but of a *welfare* kind, which falsifies or conceals the means whereby an individual can 'be himself', independent and free?

But the rejections do not end there. Illich jumps to one of his main rejections: that of the biological, intellectual and social maturity achieved by a gradual process which takes place in fixed stages. Illich affirms loftily that 'the discovery of "childhood"' was 'by the bourgeoisie'; that 'only some churches continued to respect for some time the dignity and maturity of the young'; that 'if there were no age-specific and obligatory learning institution, "childhood" would go out of production', and that in line with the proposition that rejects school, considers that it 'could also end the present discrimination against infants, adults and the old in favour of children throughout their adolescence and youth', avoiding the 'segregating' that gets human beings 'to submit to the authority of a schoolteacher'.¹

The argument—which, indeed, dispenses with the conclusions of scientific research—begins with the fallacy of assigning a negative character to immaturity when it is in fact extremely positive, since it represents the possibility of development. Rousseau, with his brilliant intuition, grasped this clearly when postulating the principle of the substantive nature of ages. Illich obviously does not think along these lines but sets out to defend, in his own way, the right of children to be respected in all their dignity. But the fact that not all human beings have the actual possibility of experiencing childhood does not imply its non-existence, but their enclosure in a certain economic and social situation which, particularly in the large urban areas, ages man prematurely (this happens in the case of all those who have to bear the brunt of work at an early age). The aim should therefore be to transform social structures so as to ensure a full life for man at each stage of his development, another of the objectives in the real struggle against alienation.

1. *Deschooling Society*, op. cit.

The utopianism of 'conviviality'

What, then, are the solutions that will give practical expression to the ideal of 'de-schooling society' and the corresponding 'disestablishment of school'? Illich formulates these as 'learning webs' and 'conviviality'.

The 'learning webs' are, for Illich, 'the new formal educational institutions' which would have to be created, serving three purposes: they should (a) 'provide all who want to learn with access to available resources at any time in their lives'; (b) 'empower all who want to share what they know to find those who want to learn it from them'; (c) 'furnish all who want to present an issue to the public with the opportunity to make their challenge known'.¹ There are four 'services' proposed: the first would 'facilitate access to things or processes used for formal learning'. The second would be a 'skill exchanges' service, permitting 'persons to list their skills, the conditions under which they are willing to serve as models for others who want to learn these skills. . .'. The third, would be an organization responsible for 'peer-matching—a communications network which permits persons to describe the learning activity in which they wish to engage, in the hope of finding a partner for the inquiry'. Lastly, the fourth service would consist of 'reference services to educators-at-large' with the establishment of a kind of directory giving the addresses of these persons, 'professionals, paraprofessionals and freelancers'.² Illich's four services are condensed, in Reimer, into two types of 'networks': 'educational objects' and 'persons'.³

The institutions proposed are certainly interesting inasmuch as they would encourage greater flexibility, more communication, increased responsiveness and the wider circulation of values and culture. But it is relevant to point out that their establishment is not necessarily incompatible with school and it may even give it a fresh impetus, just as education has benefited by lifelong education in its widest sense. But the mere idea of lifelong education is again absent from Illich's doctrine.

It should also be observed that the structure of the new 'institutions' may imply a complex bureaucratic 'system', with the risk of a stagnation process similar to that attributed to traditional institutions. Essentially—and as we have seen up to now—the root of

1. Ibid.

2. Ibid.

3. *School is Dead...*, op. cit.

these difficulties is linked with the insistence on 'Utopianistic' solutions which go beyond the conditions and real needs of present-day society and more especially of that of the future. Present and future society, whether we like it or not, demand an increasingly high level of preparation which cannot be entrusted to sporadic, free, voluntary meetings, although Illich does not entirely discard the educational use of the media provided by modern technology. The only thing is that he wants, as we do, technology to serve man, and not vice versa.

The objectives of the new educational system, like the 'learning webs' that might shape it, find their real force, within the de-schooling theory, in the category of 'conviviality' or, as Illich himself terms it in Spanish, '*convivencialidad*'. In the doctrine I am analysing 'a convivial society should be designed to allow all its members the most autonomous action by means of tools least controlled by others'.¹ Hence, conviviality is 'the capacity given to the individual for autonomous and creative intercourse with others and with the environment'.² In the meaning that Illich attaches to conviviality there is a kind of nostalgia—and this might perhaps be a key to the essence of his thinking—for the primitive Christian communities.

A tempting ideal, this fascinating, lofty goal of conviviality proposed by the 'chosen ones' of CIDOC.³ The goal is attainable in the eternal spring that Cuernavaca breathes. It is unattainable in our Calchaqui valleys, in the dark forests of Peru or Brazil, in the colourful, though wretched, indigenous communities of Mexico and Central America, or of Peru, in the hard and forbidding region leaning against the volcanic ranges of the Pacific. There, teachers and schools are needed, for, at the present time, the distant descendants of the Mayas, the Aztecs and the Incas, the inhabitants of the villages, plains and mountains, and the socially excluded groups in the great towns of our vast Latin America have no other form of 'conviviality' than that of silence. Everett Reimer must have felt something of this when he endorsed Paulo Freire's beautiful and true saying in *School is Dead*: 'the rural culture of Latin America is the culture of silence'.

1. *Tools for Conviviality*, op. cit., p. 20.

2. *Deschooling Society*, op. cit.

3. CIDOC stands for the Center for Intercultural Documentation, an institution in which Illich works, in Cuernavaca (Mexico). The expression 'chosen ones of CIDOC' has no pejorative sense here. We only have to think of the high intellectual standard represented by those who take part in CIDOC seminars and discussions: Erich Fromm, Paulo Freire, Peter Berger, Augusto Salazar Bondy, and many others of similar cultural and scientific stature.