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Giorgio Agamben & Ivan Illich

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Editorial

A late encounter with Ivan Illich

'I did not have the privilege of knowing Illich, so I encountered him as a thinker in books. I encountered Illich's thought late, but I think that any thought today which does not measure up to the critique of modernity that Illich carried out is valueless' (Giorgio Agamben, 'Pro Memoria Ivan Illich'[1]).

If Giorgio Agamben was a latecomer to Ivan Illich, it was also only late on that Illich brought himself to say, in what David Cayley described as his last 'testament', what had ultimately and always guided his thought from the earliest days. Agamben himself, in the texts translated here, frequently stresses the continuity that joins his early religious life and thought with his later work as a 'cultural critic', or more precisely a 'critic of modernity', and still more precisely a critic of its institutions (Agamben, 'Laughter and the Kingdom'). What makes Illich's critique of modernity 'incomparably more fruitful than those which have been produced in the last hundred years on both the right and the left' is precisely its 'theological depth' ('Pro Memoria').[2]

At the heart of Illich's critique is the Pauline notion of the '*mysterium iniquitatis*' (the mystery of evil or lawlessness [*anomia,* in Greek]) and the closely related notion of the 'corruption of the best', by means of which Illich refers to the institutionalisation of the Christian form of life in the Church, as well as the counterproductive destiny of the institutions of modernity in general. A messianic life which had both consummated and escaped from the clutches of the Mosaic law had been ensnared by a new and more troubling form of legality, in which the novel human relations that the Gospels had opened up were most egregiously corrupted by their own legal renditions.

It is difficult to tell who was the more profoundly disturbed by this juridification of communal life, whether Agamben or Illich, but the former unquestionably came to admire the formulation which the latter gave to the

[1] We shall here dispense with a bibliography, but details of Agamben's texts on Illich, together with a select list of Illich's own works may be found in the editor's essay, *infra*.

[2] For like praise of Illich's critique of modernity, cf. Agamben, *Where are we now?* 63; '«La nostalgia non basta, ma è un buon punto di inizio». Intervista con Giorgio Agamben' (with Valeria Montebello), Lo Sguardo: Rivista di Filosofia 19 (2015), 21; the video recording of 'Pro Memoria Ivan Illich' is dated 17th December 2012, and may be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Egy6xRwHrwE (accessed 16th April 2025). Many thanks to Arianna Bove for providing us with a transcription of this talk.

problem, and in particular the theological astuteness which Illich brought to the genealogy of modern ailments.

If both were critics of church and law, one aspect of this critique over which they were in especially hearty agreement was the Church's failure to prevent itself from becoming mired in worldly concerns, degenerating into one modern secular institution among others. Agamben is particularly concerned with the Church's abnegation of its eschatological mission, which is to say its historical task of restraining the massing of the forces of evil — the anti-Christ or Satan — until such a time as the final battle of good against evil, Christ versus Antichrist, can take place at the time of Christ's second coming or *Parousia*. The church's gaze, which was to have spanned the heaven and the earth, has become downcast.

Things are all the more subtle here — and perhaps Agamben insists on this to a greater degree than Illich does, at least in his published works — in that Agamben will insist upon a profound distinction between *eschatology* taken in a chronological sense and the Pauline concept of *'messianism'*, which implies that the messiah has already arrived and put the present moment out of joint. Agamben had dealt with this conception of messianism some years before what seems to have been the date of his encounter with Ivan Illich, a meeting which took place some time in the new millennium (the lack of any reference to Illich even in *The Time that Remains* (2000) seems to suggest as much): perhaps it was with the posthumous publication of Illich's *Rivers North of the Future*, which speaks to so many of Agamben's earlier and later concerns. On Illich's part, while he met Foucault and a number of Agamben's intimates, such as Paolo Prodi, and whilst he speaks once of 'bio-politics' and many times of life, liturgy, and sacrament, he seems never to have referred to Agamben in his own work).

In any case, the messiah sets the ultimate authority of the law at nought, and allows those faithful to the advent of Christ to treat their juridically assigned identities as nothing, 'as not', as if one could never be at home in any role — or indeed any institution — to which one was consigned by one's worldly fate. They are to be seen for what they are in the light of the messiah's promise of another kingdom, one ruled by another sovereign, more mighty than any earthly ruler.

It seems to us that we might justly entertain the hypothesis that Agamben's long series of short works on the (eschatological) notion of the Kingdom and the church as an institution, particularly in the context of the modern world (and its other, equally corrupt institutions) might well have been inspired by their author's belated acquaintance with Ivan Illich.

Later on, we find another coincidence: if Illich was always concerned with the 'convivial', and later came to contrast the aliveness of this austere and joyful life with the 'life' that was the subject of medical 'management' and 'administration' — just as earlier he had attempted to set limits to medicine and its monopolisation of the care of those who were swiftly to forget the 'vernacular' art of dying and suffering — it is not without significance that Agamben invited Illich's friend and chronicler,

David Cayley, to publish his text on the events of 2020 and 2021 on his website, which otherwise contained texts written almost exclusively by Agamben himself.[3]

Indeed it is in the context of the relation between human life and the institutions that profess themselves to have a monopoly on the salvation of man and the supplying of his needs that Roberto Esposito has recently laid out an extensive criticism of Agamben and his own response to the events of those years. It is our hope that a better understanding of Agamben's relation to the institution of the church might help us to see what his response to such an attack might be.

One question that we hope to clarify, without hoping to answer it in a way that is altogether satisfactory, is that of the *future* of our institutions in the eyes of both Illich and Agamben. Illich himself spent a long time building his own institution, in Cuernavaca, after having left the institution of the Roman Catholic Church,[4] but he eventually found it necessary to dissolve even that[5] and to remain on the margins of the institution of the Academy as a 'visiting fellow' for the rest of his life. And it is in the midst of the storm that has hardly ceased to rage over the first half of the third decade of the third millennium that Agamben allows himself to speak in a tone that reaches as far as can be imagined in an 'anti-institutional' direction.[6] And yet this is not the whole story, or at least, if it is, it must be carefully

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[3] David Cayley, 'Questions about the current pandemic from the point of view of Ivan Illich, April 8, 2020', https://www.quodlibet.it/david-cayley-questions-about-the-current-pandemic-from-the-point (accessed 16th April 2025).

[4] Agamben refers to the fact more than once, in the essays published in the present volume, and in his remarkable rendition of an autobiography, *Self-Portrait in the Studio*, in conjunction with another figure whose relation to the Law and to institutions was a spectral one — staring out from the ruins, or sadly haunting their margins, perhaps dreaming of something better: 'It is not possible to find the truth if one does not first exit from the situation — or institution — that impedes access. The philosopher must become a stranger in his own city; Illich had to somehow leave the church and Simone Weil could never decide to enter it' (*Self-Portrait,* 55).

[5] One of the reasons Illich cites for the closure of CIDOC, the Centre for Inter-Cultural Documentation, was that 'the place would not be able to save itself from university-like institutionalisation' (*Ivan Illich in Conversation*, 202).

[6] 'Italy, as the political laboratory of the West, where the strategies of the dominant powers are worked out in advance in their extreme form, is today a country in human and political ruins, where an unscrupulous tyranny determined to do anything has allied itself with a mass in the grip of pseudo-religious terror, ready to sacrifice not only what were once called constitutional freedoms, but even all warmth in human relations. To believe that the green pass means a return to normality is naive indeed. Just as a third vaccine is already being imposed, new ones will be imposed and new emergency situations and red zones will be declared for as long as the government and the powers that be deem it useful. And it is those who have unwisely obeyed who will pay the price. In these conditions, without laying down every possible instrument of immediate resistance, the dissidents need to think about creating something like a society within society, a community of friends and neighbours within the society of enmity and distance. The forms of this new clandestinity, which will have to become as autonomous as possible with respect to institutions, will have to be meditated upon and experimented with in each case, but only they can guarantee human survival in a world that has devoted itself to a more or less conscious self-destruction' (Agamben, 'A Community in Society', 17th September 2021. Available at:

interpreted: both philosophers are attempting to think a human polity — or at least a human amity — which would be freed from the weight of the law and its encumbrances, but not necessarily from something like an 'institution'.

The present volume and its contents

The present volume opens with a collection of Agamben's writings explicitly devoted to Illich, some of which we make available in translation for the first time.

Following this, Giorgio Astone considers Illich's notion of dis-establishment alongside Agamben's idea of de-(in)stitution: both thinkers are hereby seen to be concerned with the gesture that Astone describes as 'inscription', the dreadful punishment which Kafka depicts as taking place within the penal colony, as the law is engraved on the very flesh of the human being, providing us with a garish metonym for the impingement of power upon life. Eventually, as some in the twentieth century took to be the lesson of Hegel, the word murders the thing. Are institutions as such condemned to subordinate life to their 'rules and regulations', or can they be rethought from within a biopolitical conceptual scheme? Can the word be used to initiate a new and less violent relation between human beings?

Astone's essay is followed by another attempt to think the nature of the institution in Agamben's work. In so doing it addresses the question of Agamben's debt to Illich in terms of the theological genealogy of our modern and supposedly secular institutions. It deals with Agamben's most openly 'theological' texts from the new millennium, which insistently return to the question of the church as an institution. It is here that Agamben seems to us to be most inspired by Illich's work, and we attempt to determine how and in what respects this might be so, devoting particular attention to the 'mystery of evil' in the life of the Church, and its relation to the corruption of Christian love and the restoration of an eventually hypertrophic law, that has come more and more suffocatingly to constrict human behaviour.

We are thus once again left with the question of whether institutions can be modified in such a way as to make them more amenable to genuine human relations, or whether we must leave the institution altogether in order to form such a bond. Perhaps we could say that we are currently wandering amidst the ruins of our own institutions; but should we quit the building altogether?

Nicola Labanca considers Agamben's own theory of human relations in light of the 'complementary relationality' by which the two genders of pre-industrial society co-habit with one another. On Illich's account, this was perhaps the most fundamental aspect of human con-viviality before the arising of the neuter, *homo œconomicus* and his (or 'its') generic human 'needs'.

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https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-una-comunit-14-ella-societa?fbclid=IwAR3YdHDt3XO2q8AQTXsc_kPG3StvVndUV5NUP39-MJPxPd2Ef2jOFduDUyk [accessed 16th April 2025]).

Labanca examines the way in which Ivan Illich's notion of institutional counterproductivity might be illuminated by a comparison with Agamben's notion of the machine which begins to run on empty and thus allows the two poles between which it moves to coincide. Thus, at a certain threshold, the motorised means of transport supposedly intended to speed us on our way ends up reducing us to immobility. Agamben's machine rotates interminably, in an infernal state of exception in which the strong arm of the law finds us wherever we might be and keeps us locked into our symbolic role with a strictly codified set of activities and manners of relation; whilst the institutions that came to horrify Ivan Illich, which were meant to be mere means to an end, tools, eventually take to persisting solely for their own sake — and once again we are in hell.

Mar Rosàs Tosas demonstrates that the state of exception can be construed in a particularly illuminating way by singling out the notion of the law's being 'in force without having significance'. Her essay shows how this state of exception affects a series of disciplinary fields, including that of the (meta-)medical, in relation to which she argues that it might provide a philosophical explanation as to why the boundary between normal and pathological is so often disagreed upon, and, indirectly, why it is that today we find it so difficult to take an aberrant psychological and social phenomenon and pronounce it straightforwardly pathological, pursuing in place of that an empty affirmation which tends to suggest that there is no such thing as (mental) 'illness' at all.

How are we to avoid each of the two extremes of a hyper-medicalisation which so disturbed Ivan Illich, and a rash de-medicalisation that would rule out the possibility of even calling for a cure? — Rosàs provides us with a compass that might allow us to navigate between the horns of this dilemma.

Finally in this section, we present the translation of an interview between Patrick Boucheron and Giorgio Agamben, a historian and a philosopher. A scarlet thread which one might discern as running through the dialogue is precisely the question that we have raised in terms of the institution and the future of human relations in the desuetude of the law: Boucheron asks Agamben about his relation to others — in this case, other philosophers or thinkers, who have preceded him and who will resume the train of his argument once he has abandoned it (finding in him those moments of 'developability' that he takes such pleasure in finding in others). If thought is in some sense impersonal, carried out by an Averroeist intellect, nevertheless Agamben insists that the individual imagination or phantasm is what allows each thinker to imprint his own unique mark on thought. In any case, what thereby comes to pass is something like a friendly or convivial discussion between Agamben and his forebears, together with a joyful anticipation of the development of his own ideas by other philosophers yet to come.

Indeed, at one point in the conversation, the question of the institution arises, one of the functions of which is to ensure a certain conservation of ideas

between generations, and we can imagine, with the decaying of the university, that the question of transmission, and even of the unity of Science will become more and more apparent and pressing. Here Agamben speaks of institution and destitution as two poles — presumably belonging to a machine that here goes unnamed — of which, in 'post-industrial democracies', the former has come to prevail (technocratically) at the expense of genuine 'political life'. His forebear Illich could only nod sagely in agreement and delight in the kindling of a new friendship upon hearing these words. The secret of politics lies in our private life, according to Agamben's reading of Debord — politics and friendship can no longer be opposed as public and private affairs, just as theoretical contemplation is no longer to be opposed to political action.

In a section we have entitled *Varia,* Andrea Righi deploys the work of Emanuele Severino and Luisa Muraro to provide us with an intriguing reading of the notion of God-the-Father, the transcendent (and male) creator and guarantor of the totality of being.

If there is such a thing as a totality of all things, a uni-verse, then it cannot present itself save perspectivally; completion can appear only incompletely — but, as Nietzsche was among the first to ask, does the multiplicity of phenomena depend upon a transcendent instance, a divine 'perspective', a 'view from nowhere', to coordinate and totalise this multiplicity? Nietzsche's struggle with the shadows of god led him to the notion of perspectivism and a certain version of the Heraclitean flux; Severino turns instead to Parmenides and the denial of becoming. One of the novelties of the Italian philosopher's Eleaticism is that it can be used to affirm an absolute immanence to the exclusion of all transcendence.

Righi moves to explicate the complete and yet incomplete character of this immanence by way of the Lacanian formulae of sexuation, and in particular the way in which women are prone to conceive of a totality that is indeed 'in-complete' or 'non-all' but without the exception that a transcendent(al) phallic signifier might provide, 'in the name of the father'. If the god of men creates from nothing, the god of women gives birth.

Finally in this section, after some peregrination through the realms of a gendered entity prior to the historical invention of the neutered 'human' we return to the question of humanity as such. Even if in the case of Agamben the place of the human is not straightforwardly ascertainable, it remains a crucial reference point for both him and his companion in thought, Ivan Illich. The question of humanism today still remains to be altogether thought out.

In the name of such a thinking, Ezio Gamba presents us with an analysis of two books, by Michele Ciliberto and Massimo Cacciari, which jointly reinvigorate and complicate our generally one-eyed vision of historical humanism. In doing so they allow us — at least in the case of the former — to call explicitly for a new humanism today, one which understands that humanism in both its historical and

its contemporary sense must involve the acceptance of human weakness as well as an affirmation of its strength, and that humanism frequently shows its face when crisis looms.

It strikes us as eminently possible to propose a humanism — and a philosophical anthropology — that does not mistake the human being for a panacea that might ward off every type of inhumane and dehumanising treatment, but which can at least explain why humans are capable of such depravity and suggest ways to restrain them from their worst excesses.

The issue concludes with a translation of three works by a philosopher of whom Agamben thought extremely highly and who has so far remained almost entirely untranslated and unknown in the English-speaking world: Enzo Melandri.[7] We present these translations in the form of well-polished drafts and solicit suggestions for improvement and emendation — which may be directed to the translator, Alexander Ferguson, or the editor — with a view potentially to publishing revised versions at a later date.

[7] Speaking of his studio in Venice, Agamben says the following: 'Propped up on the lower left-hand shelf there is a photograph of Giorgio Colli, whose work, along with that of Enzo Melandri and Gianni Carchia, will certainly remain as a testament to Italian thought in the twentieth century. Of others, who get presented on television as the greatest philosophers of our time, absolutely nothing will remain' (*Self-Portrait*, 133). Agamben appeals to the essay on Michel Foucault, herein translated, in *The Signature of All Things: On Method*, 59 & 117n.62; cf. 96 and 120n.33; he goes on to refer to Melandri's *magnum opus*, *La linea e il circolo*, in which the essay on analogy was incorporated. Melandri's works stand on their own, but they may also be taken to illuminate the rich — and still to us, in part, obscure — background of Agamben's thought.