

Preface to the Complete Works of Ivan Illich¹

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With this volume, the publication of the first edition of the Complete Works [*Opere complete*, in Italian] of Ivan Illich begins (the *Œuvres Complètes* published by Fayard and the *Opera Omnia* – soon interrupted – at Marion Boyars are far from meriting such a title). We are convinced, in fact, that only today is Illich's work experiencing what Walter Benjamin called the 'now of legibility'.² Unlike the time of its initial reception in the seventies, Illich no longer appears to be the brilliant iconoclast who subjected the main institutions of the West to relentless criticism. At stake, in his critique of modernity, is nothing less than a new outlook on humanity – where by 'humanity' we do not mean a biologically or culturally presupposed nature, but rather the practices through which, from time immemorial, men and women have made life possible – a realm that Illich calls 'conviviality'. A philosophical problem – which is to say an ethical and political problem – *par excellence*, if philosophy is above all a recollection of anthropogenesis, which is to say, of the incessant and never fulfilled becoming human of living man.

If, in this perspective of modernity, Illich represents the untimely resurgence of a radical exercise of *krisis*, of a call to pass judgement upon Western culture without extenuating circumstances, this crisis and this judgement are all the more radical because they arise from one of its essential components, the Christian tradition. The texts collected within this first volume bear witness to a period – between 1951 and 1971 – that coincides with Illich's training inside this tradition.

¹ The current text is a translation of the Preface to Ivan Illich, *Celebrare la consapevolezza. Scritti 1951-1971. Opere complete, Volume I*. Ed. Fabio Milana. Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2020.

² Translator's Note: Elsewhere, Agamben claims: '*Das Jetzt der Lesbarkeit*, "the now of legibility" (or of 'knowability' *Erkennbarkeit*) defines a genuinely Benjaminian hermeneutic principle. The absolute opposite of the current principle according to which every work may become the object of infinite interpretations at any given moment (doubly infinite, in the sense that interpretations are never exhaustive and function independently of any historical-temporal situation). Benjamin's principle instead proposes that every work, every text, contains a historical index which indicates its belonging to a determinate epoch, as well as its only coming forth to full legibility at a determinate historical moment' (Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005, p. 145).

The approach is also debated in Wayne Stables, 'Passages with Benjamin: Reading *The Arcades Project*', *Cultural Critique* vol. 105, 2019, pp. 135-76. <https://doi.org/10.5749/culturalcritique.105.2019.0135> (accessed 1st December 2024).

These are the years of his pastorship as a priest, before becoming deputy parish priest of the Iglesia de la Encarnación in New York, and later Vice-Chancellor of the Catholic University in Puerto Rico; his participation in the Second Vatican Council in Rome and the foundation, in Cuernavaca, of the Centre for Intercultural Documentation (Centro Intercultural de Documentación). Since Illich acts here as a priest within the Church, there is a strong temptation to distinguish the author of these texts from the Illich who, on 15th March 1969, cast off ‘the privileges and powers that have been conferred by the Church’, and declared that he would forever renounce the public practice of his priesthood so as to embark upon the activities of the writer and lecturer that would later turn him into a well-known and much discussed figure the world over.

But reading the texts carefully assembled here is enough to make us realise that it is not possible to point to a fracture between the Illich inside the Church and the one outside (or on the margins) of it. The published and unpublished texts made available here – including the valuable thesis on the historiographical thought of Arnold J. Toynbee – indeed show that the conceptual arsenal of Illich the critic of modernity and archaeologist of conviviality, is born out of a radical and consistent development of theological and philosophical categories that were already present in the priest’s thinking. It therefore comes as no surprise that the category decisive, in every sense, to the thought of the young Illich is the eschatological concept of the kingdom; this was always recognised as the essential content of Jesus’s preaching, though it gradually disappeared from the pastoral practice of the Church and its vocabulary.

In this perspective, all of Illich’s thought seems to be a reflection on the kingdom and its special presence among us, already brought to completion and yet still to come.³ The incompleteness in question here is not of a temporal order; it does not imply a chronological succession, nor an accomplishment to take effect in the future. Fulfilment and unfulfilment are both contained in the present, because ‘only in the present does the Lord redeem. We have no idea if there is a future’. In this sense, contrary to what the Church claims, there is no ‘history of salvation’, a divine *oikonomía* that is manifested and progressively fulfilled in history. Salvation has no history, ‘the coming of the Lord is at hand’⁴ and here and now the believer is witness to his advent (hence, in Illich’s later thought, one can

³ TN: Elsewhere, Agamben claims: ‘The same Gospel that announced the immediate presence of the Kingdom shifts it into a time to come [...]. Hence the perplexity of theologians as to the temporal status of the Kingdom as *eschaton*, as a last time: over the supporters of “realised eschatology”, who affirm that the texts that seem to hint at a future time are to be interpreted with reference to present fulfilment, there predominate the dialectical and progressive interpretations, according to which the presence of the Kingdom is broken down into an “already” and a “not yet”, with respect to which the intermediate time is the time of salvation, which has already begun but still awaits its final realisation’ (Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Garden*. Trans. Adam Kotsko. London: Seagull Books, 2020, p. 147–48).

⁴ TN: James 5:7–9 ESV.

detect a constant distrust of the future: ‘I will never allow the shadow of the future to fall on the concepts through which I try to think what is and what has been’⁵).

Illich often compares the presence of the kingdom (intentionally written in the lower case) to understanding a joke or a funny story: the believer and the non-believer, he writes, are like two people listening to a joke: ‘They both understand the meaning of words, but only one laughs, that is, only one understands the story’. Differently from a paradigm that has been predominant in Western politics and the Church, Illich believes that the experience of the event of the kingdom need not imply a further historical event, to be realised in the future. It coincides entirely with the present moment, when the one who has understood the announcement bears witness to it, laughing. As Illich suggests in the interview on the meaning of Cuernavaca published in the appendix to this volume: ‘We should be men who play because we know [...] that God himself could not have created the world for any other purpose than to play with it, although he certainly could have created it to make it serve some purpose through “uselessness”, through “play”’. And with tenacious, irreducible seriousness, Illich would practise this useless game throughout his life.

⁵ Editor’s Note: cf. ‘I will not allow the shadow of some brilliant future, of something which is to come, to fall on the concepts with which I try to grasp what is and what has been’ (David Cayley, *Ivan Illich in Conversation*. Toronto: House of Anansi, 1992, p. 189).