Introduction to Ivan Illich, *Gender: Per una Critica Storica Dell'Uguaglianza*[1]

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1. Perhaps the moment of Ivan Illich's 'legibility' — as Walter Benjamin would call it — has arrived. In the seventies, he was mainly known for his *De-schooling Society* (1971) and *Medical Nemesis* (1976), works that granted him widespread success but also misinterpretations. The 1975 debate between Gilles Martinet and Jean-Marie Domenach — featured in *L'arc* — is instructive in this respect: there, Illich is described either as a Christian who critiques science in the name of regressive communitarian ideals, or as the 'first social scientist of our times, as Marx was in his'. In any case, the work of this 'licensed iconoclast' — as a famous newspaper called Illich at the time — would be considered as if it were just another critique of institutions of the kind that marked the lasting repercussions of 1968.

It is high time that we read Illich in a different perspective. If philosophy necessarily demands an interrogation of the humanity and non-humanity of mankind, then his research, which concerns the destiny of humankind at a decisive moment in its history, is genuinely philosophical, as is his method — an archaeology that developed independently of Michel Foucault. In this respect, with reference to Benjamin's Angel of History who walks backwards towards the present with its eyes fixed upon the past, Illich is more of a crab, moving back towards the past with its gaze fixed upon the present.

2. When it comes to our knowledge of the present, arguably there is little that the gaze of Illich's crab has not profoundly reinvented. Time and again, his global analysis concerns the very system men used to secure their subsistence over time. According to Illich, this system combines two different modes of production: an autonomous one — producing use values destined for the domestic sphere or, in his terms, the vernacular as opposed to the market; and a heteronomous one — geared to the production of commodities for the market. When the expansion of the heteronomous system (quantitatively the most significant by far) reaches a threshold beyond which autonomous production disappears, to give way to what

[1] Giorgio Agamben, 'Introduzione', in Ivan Illich, *Gender: Per una Critica Storica Dell'Uguaglianza* [Towards a Critical History of Equality]. Trans. Ettore Capriolo. Ed. Fabio Milana (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2013), pp. 7–17.

Illich names 'shadow work' (that is, the unpaid work of the consumer who makes market commodities usable), we enter into a 'paradoxical counter-productivity' whereby heteronomous production has effects that are directly opposed to those it aimed to achieve. The example Illich used, which could go by the name of the 'snail's theorem', incisively illustrates this counter-productivity: having reached a given number of shell whorls, the snail must stop making them; if it carried on, a single further whorl would increase its weight and volume sixteen-fold.

Illich used this theorem to demonstrate, in his rightly famous analyses, that schools, without reducing social discrimination, make individuals incapable of learning by themselves; that medicine, expanding beyond a certain threshold, ends up producing iatrogenic diseases whilst expropriating people of their ability to withstand their own pain and alleviate that of others; that high-speed and expensive transport, instead of saving time, in fact taken as a whole exacts more hours from those who need it and therefore turns out to be slower than a bicycle.

At the beginning of the seventies, a group of sociologists tested Illich's hypothesis and demonstrated that, in terms of 'generalised time expenditure' — including the hours necessary to buy and maintain a car as well — the car belonging to an average French person travels 15500 kilometres per year and yet the driver devotes 1550 hours a year to that car, which means that on average they travel at a speed of ten kilometres per hour as opposed to the thirteen they would achieve on a bicycle. However, the objective of transport policy is economic productivity rather than the interests of individuals, and therefore building motorways and car production become further intensified.

These kinds of analyses have been amply debated, but one should not neglect the studies that Illich also carried out on so-called 'disabling professions' that monopolise a given activity by expropriating those who had practised it in the past (we would add to Illich's catalogue, the architects' profession, given that since their emergence in the nineteenth century they have expropriated men of the ability to build, which humans had deployed for millennia); the critique of notions of scarcity and need that define the economy of the industrial era and its constitutively needy *Homo œconomicus*, who is both an ideal customer of the capitalist market and the perfect recipient of state support; the critique of the fetish of life and the bioethics that ensues from it; the genealogy of the secularisation of the ecclesiastical pastorate; and, last but not least, the astonishing reconstruction of the transformation of the book and of reading from the twelfth century onwards (*In the Vineyard of the Text*, 1993).

These studies all concern a threat to man's humanity; though it must be said that 'humanity' here stands not for a biologically and culturally presupposed nature, but simply for the immemorial practices that men engage in to make life possible, the realm Illich named 'conviviality' — a philosophical problem *par excellence*, in so far as philosophy is first and foremost a recollection of anthropogenesis, that is, of the becoming human of the living man.

3. It is impossible to comprehend a historical era or thought without comprehending its experience of its own time. Illich's analyses are often irrefutable because of the lucidity he displays in situating his thought within this experience. Schmitt's thesis, that all political concepts are secularised theological concepts, is well-known, and yet in order to be made cogent, we should add to it that, today, secularised concepts are also eschatological. Contemporary thought has tried to avoid a confrontation with its own historical situation by having recourse to such blatantly inadequate concepts as the end of history, post-history, post-modernity; it did so because it is founded, ultimately, on a secularisation of Christian eschatology. This is why, in a gesture that recalls Benjamin's projection of messianism onto profane history, Illich can take his own time at its word and examine it in an avowedly apocalyptic perspective. In his last conversations with David Cayley, Illich stated that attributing to him the idea that we live in a 'post-Christian era' would be entirely inappropriate. 'On the contrary', he said, 'I believe this to be, paradoxically, the most obviously Christian epoch, which might be quite close to the end of the world'.[2]

4. Perhaps the concept most central to the secularised eschatology of modernity is crisis. It is not only in politics and economics, but also in every area of social life, that crisis now coincides with a normal state. Of the three semantic fields that merge in the history of the term (the juridico-political sense of the 'judgement' in a trial or assembly, the medical sense of the moment decisive to the progression of a disease, and the theological sense of the last judgement) only the last two have contributed to its definitive meaning in modernity. Both of these, however, have undergone a transformation in their temporal order. *Krisis* meant, in ancient medicine, the judgement by which the doctor recognised whether someone afflicted with disease would survive or die, get better or worse. Such a judgement coincided with a precise moment in the development of the disease, one that Galen called the critical period (*krisimoi, dies decretorii*). In the modern concept of crisis, on the other hand, as crisis has become a permanent condition, the connection with the moment of decision is no longer there. Crisis becomes separated from its 'decisive point' and is prolonged indefinitely over time.

The same applies to the final judgement in theology. Here judgement was inseparable from the end of the thing being judged. As St. Thomas wrote, 'judgement belongs to the term, wherein [things] are brought to their end' (*Summa Theologica,* Supplementary Question 88, Article 1). 'Judgement cannot be passed perfectly upon any changeable subject before its consummation [...]. Wherefore, there must be a final Judgement at the last day, in which everything concerning every man in every respect shall be perfectly and publicly judged' (*Summa Theologica* III, q. 59, art. 5). In the modern secularisation of 'crisis', judgement becomes separate from its essential connection to the end, and is made to coincide

[2] Editor's note: cf. Ivan Illich, *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich as told to David Cayley* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 2005), 169–70.

with a chronological evolution, so that the thing can never be conceived in its accomplishment and proper finality. Consequently, the faculty of deciding once and for all is taken away, and the constant decision never properly decides anything.

5. Starting with *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil,* Hannah Arendt devoted much of her theory to a reflection on modernity's loss of this ability to judge. The faculties of thought and judgement are, in her view, both distinct and inextricably linked. Thought is not a cognitive faculty, but that which makes possible a judgement concerning good and evil, just and unjust. Eichmann lacked neither rationality nor moral sense, but rather the faculty to think, and thus the faculty to judge his own actions.

Illich represents the untimely re-emergence of a radical exercise of *krisis* in modernity, of an uncompromising call to judgement in Western culture — a *krisis* and judgement that are all the more radical for being descendants of one of their essential components: the Christian tradition. Like Benjamin, Illich uses messianic eschatology to neutralise the progressive conception of historical time. He does so in two interconnected ways: on the one hand, the experience of *kairos*, the decisive moment that breaks the continuity and homogeneous line of chronology; on the other hand, the ability to think of time in relation to its completion. In Arendt's terms, the temporal instant of decision and the *novissima dies,* where time is consummated, are two doors by which thought might enter the faculty of judgement. But, in the hour of judgement, the *eschaton* and the 'now' coincide, without remainder.

This situation, original with respect to time and history, defines the pertinence and force of Illich's 'crisis' of modernity. Each of his studies takes on its full meaning only if it is situated in the unitary perspective of something we would consider — with Hannah Arendt's and Gunther Anders' — amongst the farthest reaching and most consistent philosophical critiques of the devastating powers of progressivism — and the 'Absurdistan or hell on earth' that, for all its good intentions, the latter brings to fruition.

As we have argued, whilst rooted in the Christian tradition, this critique was also inseparable from an awareness of its responsibilities in the fate of modernity. What differentiates Illich from the progressivist or reactionary critiques of our society is his rootedness in that tradition, and with it, his ability to leave it behind, without reservations, and head towards philosophy. And if philosophy is not a discipline but rather an intensity that can animate any field, in Illich's case, it takes the form of an intensification of the realm where the tensions of Christianity unfold before the catastrophic effects of its secular perversion take hold.

6. To understand Illich's situation in relation to the theological tradition we must start with his conversations with David Cayley published in *The Rivers North of the Future* (2005). The 'rivers north of the future' that the subtitle presents as the 'testament of Ivan Illich' are where — as stated in an earlier interview with Cayley

himself — independently of any testamentary intention Illich certainly wished to provide a key with which all of his works might be read. Both interviews feature the expression *mysterium iniquitatis* (the mystery of evil, with reference to the unknown and extreme character of the evil that modern man must confront). 'The *mysterium iniquitatis',* Illich claims,

> is a *mysterium* because it can be grasped only through the revelation of God in Christ. [...] But I also believe that the mysterious evil that entered the world with the Incarnation can be investigated historically, and, for this, neither faith nor belief is required but only a certain power of observation. Is it not the case that our world is out of whack with any prior historical epoch? The more I try to examine the present as a historical entity, the more it seems confusing, unbelievable, and incomprehensible. It forces me to accept a set of axioms for which I find no parallels in past societies and displays a puzzling kind of horror, cruelty, and degradation with no precedent in other historical epochs. [...] How to explain this extraordinary evil?
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> I would say that this question can be looked at in an entirely new light if you begin from the assumption [...] that we are not standing in front of an evil of the ordinary kind but of that corruption of the best which occurs when the Gospel is institutionalised and love is transmogrified into claims for service. The first generation of Christianity recognised that a mysterious type of — how shall I call it? — perversion, inhumanity, denial had become possible. Their idea of the *mysterium iniquitatis* gives me a key to understand the evil which I face now and for which I can't find a word. I, at least, as a man of faith, should call this evil a mysterious betrayal or perversion of the kind of freedom which the Gospels brought.[3]

This long quotation demonstrates Illich's particular approach to contemporaneity effectively: while clearly identifying its theological foundation, he did not forego a purely historical inquiry. The specificity of his critique consists, in fact, in investigating how the shift from the extra-historical to the historical and from the theological to the profane occurred; for instance, how the notions of love, freedom, and contingency, that Christianity invented, were transferred to services, State, and science, thus producing the exact opposite of what they had originally been; and how the notion of the Church as a *societas perfecta* could end up producing the modern idea of the State as in charge of the total government of human life in all of its aspects. This is the paradigm of the *corruptio optimi quae est pessima* — a lens through which he views the history of the Church.

[3] Translator's note: Illich, *The Rivers North of the Future,* pp. 60–61.

7. The expression *mysterium iniquitatis* is taken from Paul's second epistle to the Thessalonians. In this letter, Paul speaks of the Parousia of the Lord, describing the eschatological drama of a conflict that sees on the one hand a Messiah, and on the other two characters he names 'the man of anomie', *ho anthropos tes anomias* (literally, the 'man of the absence of law'), and 'the one who withholds' (*ho katechon*):

> Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin [*ho anthropos tes anomias*] be revealed, the son of perdition; who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God. Remember ye not, that, when I was yet with you, I told you these things? And now ye know what withholdeth that he might be revealed in his time. For the mystery of iniquity [*mysterion tes anomias*, which the Vulgate translates as *mysterium iniquitatis*] doth already work: only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way. And then shall that Wicked [*anomos,* literally 'the lawless'] be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming. (2. Thess. 2. 2–11)

Whilst the exegetical tradition agrees in identifying the 'man of anomie' with the Antichrist, already in the first of St John's Epistles (2.18), when it comes to 'the withholder' — of whom St. Augustine speaks in the *City of God* (XX, 19) — we find two main interpretations. Some — including St Jerome and, among the moderns, Carl Schmitt, who view the *katechon* as the only chance of conceiving history within a Christian framework — see it as an allusion to the Roman Empire that acts as a power holding back the catastrophe of the end of the world; others — among whom is a contemporary of St Augustine, Ticonius — believe that what delays this eschatological drama is the divided nature of the Church, that has a saintly and luminous side but also a dark and sinister one where the Antichrist resides and grows.

Illich's particular reading of the *mysterium iniquitatis* can be inscribed in this exegetical tradition. However, in his view, contrary to the mainstream interpretation of contemporary philosophers and theologians, this mystery is not meta-historical, a gloomy theological drama that paralyses and makes all action and decision enigmatic; it is a historical drama, as we have argued, of that *corruptio optimi pessima* that has made it possible, over the centuries, for the Church to beget its own anti-Christ perversion in modernity. And in this historical drama, the *eschaton*, the final day, coincides with the present, with St. Paul's 'now-time', where the divided nature — both Christian and Anti-Christian — not only of the Church,

but of every human institution, finds its apocalyptic revelation; and in this historical drama Illich chose to play his part, without ambiguity or reservations.

8. *Gender*, the 1982 book hereby presented, must be situated in this perspective. Over a decade later, Illich would write, in an important Preface to the German edition (hitherto unpublished in Italian) that this book emerged from the 'repugnance' he felt before the 'terrible corruption of what is most excellent', which for him, to the very end, constituted an 'enigma' upon which he wanted to shed light. But he also suggests that the book is a turning point for his research. The loss of gender and its transformation into sexuality — which is the theme of the book — are here no longer approached in the manner of an 'aggressive critique of modernity', but in the way of 'thoughtful' research on the 'social history of a lived *we*', that is, a reflection on the 'changes in the modes of perception' of the body and its relations with the world, that under the pressure of 'myth-making rituals' (among which Illich mentions the school, medicine, the mission, urban planning, transport, and propaganda) have caused the depletion of countless forms of vernacular life. It is necessary to add an important note to what we have already mentioned regarding the rigour of Illich's critique of modernity. In his view, judgement is the more unforgiving the more it retains all of its memories, the more it affords the only chance of safeguarding the vernacular universe he never tires of evoking and describing in all of its elements. Judgement is merciless because within it things look lost and irredeemable; salvation is benign because within it things appear to be beyond judgement. The complex intertwining of judgement and salvation defines the particular *ethos* of Illich's writings and his thought.

In this movement of his, along the arduous ridge between judgement and salvation, between historical memory and the critique of the present, it is possible to explain the disorientation and near bewilderment that characterised the book's initial reception. The re-vindication of 'gender' (in English, *gender* is exclusively a grammatical category) — that recalls a 'duality of the human' which distinguishes the 'places, times, tools, tasks, forms of speech, gestures, and perceptions that are associated with men from those associated with women'[4] — as opposed to a 'sex' conceived of rather as the polarisation of all of these characteristics, dignity and rights that, since the late eighteenth century, were attributed equally to all human beings, was too unusual for a modern audience to be entirely acceptable. In the same way, his critique of 'women's organised ambition to achieve economic equality', imprisoned in the very capitalist logic it believed it was fighting against, was too precocious for its time. The strange thing was that some years later, at least beginning with Judith Butler's book *Gender Trouble* in 1991, the term *gender* would become crucial to changing the very denomination of studies on feminism, now reframed under the new academic label of *Gender Studies*. Butler's book,

[4] Editor's Note: Ivan Illich, *Gender* (London: Marion Boyars, 1983), p.3.

however, though also critiquing the biological dimension of sex as opposed to the cultural dimension of gender, did not once feature Illich's name.

Many are the signs that might lead one to assume that in this field Illich's thought might have reached the hour of its legibility. But this will not happen so long as contemporary philosophy refuses to come to terms with this master, who is illustrious and yet still stubbornly confined to the margins of academic debate.