

IVAN ILLICH'S LATE CRITIQUE OF *DESCHOOLING SOCIETY*:  
 "I WAS LARGELY BARKING UP THE WRONG TREE"

Rosa Bruno-Jofré

Faculty of Education  
 Queen's University, Canada

Jon Igelmo Zaldívar

Faculty of Psychology and Education  
 University of Deusto, Bilbao, Spain

**ABSTRACT.** In this article, Rosa Bruno-Jofré and Jon Igelmo Zaldívar examine Ivan Illich's own critique of *Deschooling Society*, and his subsequent revised critique of educational institutions and understanding of education, within the context of both his personal intellectual journey and the general epistemological shift that started to take shape in the early 1980s. Bruno-Jofré and Zaldívar consider how, over time, Illich refocused his quest on examining the roots (origin) of modern certitudes (such as those related to education) and explored how human beings are integrated into the systems generated by those "certainties." Illich engaged himself in historical analysis rather than providing responses to specific contemporary problems, while maintaining an interest in the relation between the present and the past. Under the metaphors of the word, the page, and the screen, he identified three great mutations in Western social imaginaries and the reconstruction of the individual self. Bruno-Jofré and Zaldívar argue that while his written work, including *Deschooling Society*, generally had an apophatic character, his critique of education, particularly in the late 1980s and 1990s, is intertwined with his analysis of the parable of the Good Samaritan and his belief that modernity is an outcome of corrupted Christianity.

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, there has been a renewed interest in the critique of schooling expounded by Ivan Illich at the beginning of the 1970s. It is part of a search for new frames of reference in critical pedagogy on the part of educators committed to ecological, anticapitalist, and messianic movements,<sup>1</sup> and of those attempting to theorize the changes brought by new information and communication technologies to pedagogy and education in a broad sense.<sup>2</sup> Naturally, Illich has also appealed to those who reject schooling

1. See, for example, Richard Kahn, *Critical Pedagogy, Ecoliteracy, and Planetary Crisis* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010); Tyson Lewis, "Messianic Pedagogy," *Educational Theory* 60, no. 2 (2010): 231–248; Gustavo Esteva and Madhu Suri Prakash, *Grassroots Post-Modernism: Remaking the Soil of Cultures* (New York: Zed Books, 1998); and Roberto Espejo, "Humanismo radical, decrecimiento y energía: una lectura de las ideas de Iván Illich" [Radical Humanism, Decrease, and Energy: A Reading of the Ideas of Ivan Illich], *Revista Polis. Universidad Bolivariana de Chile* 7, no. 21 (2008): 63–79.

2. See, for example, Ian Hart, "Deschooling and the Web: Ivan Illich 30 Years On," *Educational Media Information* 38, no. 23 (2001): 69–76; Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear, eds., *DIY Media: Creating, Sharing and Learning with New Technologies* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009); and Juha Suoranta and Tere Vadén, "From Social to Socialist Media: The Critical Potential of the Wikiworld," in *Critical Pedagogy: Where Are We Now?* ed. Joe L. Kincheloe and Peter McLaren (New York: Peter Lang, 2007).

and advocate homeschooling.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, *The International Journal of Illich Studies* published its first issue in 2009.

However, the scholarship on Illich and education, while concentrating on his earlier and polemical books such as *Deschooling Society*, published in 1971,<sup>4</sup> has neglected the articles he wrote in the 1980s and 1990s, which convey shifts in his intellectual journey and the articulation of his critique of *Deschooling Society* as naïve, something that he had felt even at the time of its publication. He marked his distance from this book as part of his reflection on history and memory and his preoccupation with education as a historical discourse.<sup>5</sup> Thus, in 1995 he wrote, “While my criticism of schooling in that book may have helped some people reflect on the unwanted social side effects of that institution — and perhaps pursue meaningful alternatives to it — I now realize that I was largely barking up the wrong tree.”<sup>6</sup>

Our goal in this essay is to examine Illich’s critique of *Deschooling Society* and his subsequent revised critique of educational institutions within the context of his own intellectual journey and the epistemological shift that took place in the early 1980s. Texts of particular relevance are the speech he delivered in 1986 at the American Educational Research Association General Assembly, entitled “A Plea for Research on Lay Literacy”;<sup>7</sup> his paper “Mnemosyne: The Mold of Memory,” delivered in 1990 at the conference “The Socio-Semiotics of Objects: The Role of Artifacts in Social Symbolic Processes”;<sup>8</sup> the foreword he wrote in 1995 for

---

3. See, for example, Patrick Farenga, “Homeschooling: Creating Alternatives to Education,” *Bulletin of Science, Technology, and Society* 18, no. 2 (1998): 127–133; and Jessica Pykett, “Personalization and De-schooling: Uncommon Trajectories in Contemporary Education Policy,” *Critical Social Policy* 29, no. 3 (2009): 374–397.

4. Other books by Ivan Illich from this period — such as *Tool for Conviviality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973); *Energy and Equity* (New York: Calder and Boyars, 1973); and *Medical Nemesis* (New York: Calder and Boyars, 1975) — have also received a great deal of attention in various fields and disciplines.

5. Ivan Illich, “The History of *Homo Educandus*” (1984), in *In the Mirror of the Past: Lectures and Addresses, 1978–1990* (London: Marion Boyars, 1992).

6. Ivan Illich, “Foreword,” in *Deschooling Our Lives*, ed. Matt Hern (Gabriola Island, Canada: New Society Publishers, 1995), vii.

7. Ivan Illich, “A Plea for Research on Lay Literacy,” *North American Review* 272, no. 3 (1987): 10–17. This work will be cited in the text as *RLL* for all subsequent references.

8. Ivan Illich, “Mnemosine: La huella de la Memoria” [Mnemosyne: The Mold of Memory], in *Iván Illich: Obras Reunidas, vol. 2* [Ivan Illich: Collected Works, vol. 2] (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica,

---

ROSA BRUNO-JOFRÉ is Professor of Education at Queen’s University, Duncan McArthur Hall, 511 Union St., Kingston, Ontario, Canada, K7M 5R7; e-mail <brunojor@queensu.ca>. Her primary areas of scholarship are the history of education, the history of religious congregations, educational theory, and intellectual theory.

JON IGELMO ZALDÍVAR is Assistant Researcher at University of Deusto, 24 Avd. de las Universidades, Bilbao, Bizkaia, Spain CP4 8007; e-mail <jigelmoza@deusto.es>. His primary areas of scholarship are the deschooling theories of the 1960s and 1970s and the current tendencies of educational historiography.

Matt Hern's book *Deschooling Our Lives*; and the interviews published by David Cayley in 1992 and 2005, respectively titled *Ivan Illich in Conversation* and *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich*.<sup>9</sup>

In the early 1980s, Illich, who conceived the institutions providing services such as education, transportation, and health as tools that had an impact on society and the environment, was in the midst of an epistemological shift when he decided to move his attention from what the tools did or were doing to what they were saying.<sup>10</sup> It was also a time when he retreated from political involvement and more into himself.<sup>11</sup> He showed little interest in the major events of the 1980s, such as the Nicaraguan Revolution and its failure or the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Some have speculated that the controversy generated by the lectures based on the manuscript of his book *Gender*, delivered in 1982 at the University of California, Berkeley, and the poor reviews of the book itself had an impact on Illich (*RNF*, 24). Most important, perhaps, he questioned the image that had been built around him as a political thinker looking for solutions and alternatives to the model of industrial development.

We intend to show that at this moment of his journey, he refocused his quest toward the roots (origins) of modern certitudes, such as those related to education, by engaging himself in historical analysis rather than concentrating on responses to specific contemporary problems. Along the way, he developed an original understanding of the past and brought new interpretive concepts and metaphors that opened for him new ways of seeing education. In order to understand his repositioning not only in relation to *Deschooling Society* but in terms of the way he developed his views on schools, education, learning, and the place of God and Christianity in those understandings, we will explore major turning points. For Illich, the Church was also a "tool" as he understood it.

#### TOWARD DESCHOOLING SOCIETY

Before we delve further into the issue under discussion, it might be useful context for readers to know a bit about Illich's background and how he reached the

---

2008). In this essay, we cite the Spanish translation of "Mnemosyne: The Mold of Memory" included in *Iván Illich: Obras Reunidas* because this is currently the primary resource used by scholars studying Illich's thought.

9. David Cayley, *Ivan Illich in Conversation* (Toronto, Canada: House of Anansi Press, 1992); and David Cayley, *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich as Told to David Cayley* (Toronto, Canada: House of Anansi Press, 2005). These works will be cited in the text as *IIC* and *RNF*, respectively, for all subsequent references.

10. In reference to the epistemological changes that took place in the 1980s, Illich said to Cayley, "I became increasingly interested in analyzing not what tools do but what they say to a society and why society accepts what they say as a certainty" (see *IIC*, 111).

11. As pointed out by Valentina Borremans and Jean Robert, "After 1976, Illich was not on the front page of the papers any longer, neither was he engaged in a dialogue with the big people of the world. He did not go to Mexico often, and from 1976 until his death on December 2, 2002, he had become for many an unknown sea." See Valentina Borremans and Jean Robert, "Prefacio" [Preface], in *Iván Illich Obras: Reunidas, vol. 1* [Ivan Illich: Collected Works, vol. 1] (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2006), 14.

point of writing *Deschooling Society*. Briefly, Illich was an ordained priest who, in spite of many conflicts, never left the Catholic Church. Contrary to what has been reported,<sup>12</sup> Illich died a priest even though he did not perform the usual duties as such. Born in Vienna in 1926, he attended the Pontifical Gregorian University in the 1940s and completed his doctorate in 1950 at the University of Salzburg, writing his thesis on Arnold Toynbee (*IIC*, 82). References in his writings show early contact with theologians involved with the “nouvelle théologie,” which emerged after the “modernist crisis” and the “return to scholastics” (prompted by the Vatican between 1850 and 1920) and led to neo-Thomism. The latter marked a return to St. Thomas’s writings and opened a dialogue with modernity.<sup>13</sup> In the 1950s, Illich was engaged in pastoral work in New York, and between 1956 and 1960 he served as vice president of the Pontifical Catholic University in Ponce, Puerto Rico.<sup>14</sup> He had developed dissenting views on the politics of the Church and its missionary work in Latin America by 1960; he questioned the use of the Gospel to support any particular political view and the imposition of modern values.<sup>15</sup> Cayley referred to Illich’s understanding of his mission as a searching self-criticism, a disposition to listen, and an ability to “relativize one’s own culture in order to hear what the Gospel says when it speaks in the voice of another culture” (*RNF*, 6).

In 1961, Illich, with a group of collaborators, founded the *Centro de Investigaciones Culturales* (later, *Centro Intercultural de Documentación*, or CIDOC), in Cuernavaca, Mexico, to prepare Canadian and American missionaries, who, following Pope John XXIII’s call, would work on modernizing Church projects in Latin America. CIDOC played a central role in critiquing developmentalist policies sponsored by developed countries, focusing particularly on the United States’ intervention in Latin America and the role of the Church in those projects.<sup>16</sup> Until 1968, Illich centered his critique on the Catholic Church as an institution.<sup>17</sup> However, after the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith at

12. See, for example, Ricardo Nassif, “The Theory of ‘De-schooling’ Between Paradox and Utopianism,” *Prospects: Quarterly Review of Education* 5, no. 3 (1975): 329–340; David A. Gabbard, “Ivan Illich, Postmodernism, and the Eco-crisis: Reintroducing a ‘Wild’ Discourse,” *Educational Theory* 44, no. 2 (1994): 173–187; and Marcelo Gajardo, “Thinkers on Education: Ivan Illich (1926–),” *Perspectivas: Revista Trimestral de Educación Comparada* 23, no. 3–4 (1993): 711–720, <http://pustakalaya.olenepal.org/view.php?pid=Pustakalaya:821>.

13. Jürgen Mettepenningen, *Nouvelle Théologie — New Theology: Inheritor of Modernism, Precursor of Vatican II* (London: T&T Clark International, 2010), 20–27.

14. Francine du Plessix Gray, *Divine Disobedience: Profiles in Catholic Radicalism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 241.

15. Ivan Illich, “The Vanishing Clergyman,” *CIDOC Informa*, no. 10 (1967).

16. Todd Hartch, “Ivan Illich and the American Catholic Missionary Initiative in Latin America,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 33, no. 4 (2009): 185–189.

17. In 1970, Herder and Herder published *The Church, Change, and Development*, a compilation of various texts critical of the Catholic Church that Illich had published in the 1960s. Also in 1970, Doubleday published Illich’s *Celebration of Awareness: A Call For Institutional Revolution*, which

the Vatican interrogated him that same year,<sup>18</sup> Illich moved away from critiquing Catholic institutions and devoted his "pamphlets" on education, written between 1969–1971, to a critique of the pillars sustaining the ideology of modern secular progress.<sup>19</sup> Incidentally, the first book he published after his conflict with the Vatican was *Deschooling Society*.

The first draft of *Deschooling Society* was published in Mexico, in the collection "CIDOC Cuadernos," in September 1970 under the title *The Dawn of Epimethean Man and Other Essays*. The volume contained the first chapters of what would be published later as the first edition of *Deschooling Society*. Illich had written most of the pamphlets contained in this book for the seminar "Alternatives in Education" that Everett Reimer organized for CIDOC starting in 1968. Many of the papers (later chapters) were published when written and reprinted in some of the most important magazines of the time, such as *New York Review of Books*, *Social Policy*, and *Les Temps Modernes*. In the spring of 1971, *Deschooling Society* was published by Harper and Row in New York. The book contained seven chapters: "Why We Must Disestablish Schools," "Phenomenology of School," "Ritualization of Progress," "Institutional Spectrum," "Irrational Consistencies," "Learning Webs," and "Rebirth of Epimethean Man."

Little attention has been paid to Illich's response to his critics or to his comment, a few months after the publication of *Deschooling Society*, regarding the change that the publisher (Harper) made to the book's title and the confusion it generated among readers. Thus, he wrote in an article titled "The Alternative of Schooling," published in *Saturday Review* in June 1971, and in another titled "After Deschooling, What?" published in the journal *Social Policy* in September 1971, that his intention was not to end schooling, but to liberate education, to liberate it from the state and move the control to socially organized grassroots movements.<sup>20</sup> In addition, at the World Conference of Christian Education, held in Lima, Peru, in June 1971, Illich claimed that he advocated the disestablishment of the school as an institution in the same sense that the term "disestablishment" is used in the United States to talk about the separation of church and state.<sup>21</sup>

---

contained a critique of the Church but also a critique of modern institutions in relation to the crisis of the Catholic Church at the end of the 1960s.

18. Centro Intercultural de Documentación (CIDOC), *México: "entredicho" del Vaticano a CIDOC 1966–1969* [Mexico: "Question" from the Vatican to CIDOC 1966–1969] (Cuernavaca: Centro Intercultural de Documentación, 1969).

19. Illich referred here to what would be chapters in *Deschooling Society* as "pamphlets" because it was, in his view, the best way to describe them given that they were originally distributed individually and in an anarchic manner using various networks. They were meant for widespread public dissemination and were not grounded in a careful bibliographic background (see *IIC*, 120).

20. Ivan Illich, "After Deschooling, What?" *Social Policy* (September–October 1971): 5–13; and Ivan Illich, "The Alternative to Schooling," *Saturday Review* 54 (June 19, 1971): 25, 44–48, and 59–60.

21. Ivan Illich, "La desescolarización de la Iglesia" [Deschooling the Church], in *Iván Illich Obras Reunidas*, vol. 1, 116–124.

*Deschooling Society* has an intuitive quality but also a few methodological problems. The exchange with Paulo Freire in Geneva in 1975, five years after the publication in 1970 of both Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and the first version of what it would be *Deschooling Society*, is illustrative. Freire pointed out that Illich erred in refusing to analyze the ideological question, and for that reason he was unable to understand the phenomenon in its entirety. Illich separated the critique of the tool (the institution) from the critique of the ideology of education. Freire identified this methodological issue as a problem in a face-to-face debate with Illich that centered on their respective books.<sup>22</sup> Illich was not prepared to discuss the matter at that time. Freire had concerns about Illich's understanding of the school as an institution possessing a demonic essence that had either to be suppressed or surpassed, without looking at the issues from an ideological perspective. Freire, in contrast, believed that the ideological force behind schooling as a social institution can be changed and that reform efforts should work toward such ideological change.<sup>23</sup>

In April 1976, thirteen years after its establishment, Illich closed CIDOC out of concern that it could become institutionalized or that it might be bought by an American university. Illich and his collaborators had concluded that everything they proposed to do when they founded it had been achieved (*IIC*, 203–204). The end of CIDOC had serious repercussions on Illich's intellectual life. By the beginning of the 1970s, CIDOC had become an international center for the critical study of modern institutions by avant-garde intellectuals, politicians, and leaders of countercultural movements from all over the world. At a time when Latin America was a political laboratory, CIDOC was a place where discussion about alternatives to development and progress took place, as well as debates over radical options.<sup>24</sup> Such debates had in fact inspired the pedagogical basis of *Deschooling Society*. Furthermore, CIDOC was Illich's point of contact with the social and political reality of Latin America. Unlike Paulo Freire, Sergio Méndez Arceo, or Augusto Salazar Bondy, who also had some connection to CIDOC, Illich did not position himself in a clear way with reference to the grassroots political movements that aimed at social change in Latin America. He connected with Latin American social reality through CIDOC while maintaining cordial relations with Mexican rulers. Thus, the closing of CIDOC closed off the space in which Illich had maintained his commitment to actual social and political change.

---

22. Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich, *La Educación: Autocrítica* [Education: Self-Criticism] (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Búsqueda, 1986).

23. Paulo Freire, "La dimensión política de la educación" [The Political Dimension of Education], in *Cuadernos Pedagógicos* no. 8 (Quito, Ecuador: CEDECO, 1985); and Carlos Alberto Torres, *Paulo Freire en América Latina: materiales para una crítica de la pedagogía problematizadora de Paulo Freire* [Paulo Freire in Latin America: Materials for a Critical Pedagogy of Paulo Freire's Problematizing] (Mexico: Ediciones Gemika, 1979).

24. José María Sbert, *Epimeteo, Iván Illich y el sendero de la sabiduría* [Epimetheus, Ivan Illich, and the Path of Wisdom] (Mexico: Ediciones sin nombre, 2009), 83–84.



This event symbolizes the end of an important phase of Illich's intellectual biography. It is important to mention that between 1969 and 1976, there was a close connection between the activities that took place at CIDOC and Illich's publications. Thus, the four thematic areas that Illich pursued at CIDOC — the critique of modern institutions, with particular focus on the Catholic Church, the schools, transportation, and hospitals — were also themes explored in seminars organized by the center.<sup>25</sup>

Illich seemed to have perceived that the closing of CIDOC also meant the end of a phase of his life — a phase that he later, in an interview with Cayley, said felt like an interminable electoral campaign:

There was a time when I was on a campaign trying to make people reflect on what schools do, on what education implies, on the unhealthy results of the medicalization of society, and so on. This campaigning period of my life extended from, let's say, 1962 to 1972. And during that time, at a certain moment I came to feel like jukebox. Arguments I had made a year or two before on a 33 rpm record were now down to a short one, to a 45 rpm. When I arrived in front on my audience, I told them, "Just push the right combination of buttons, I'll deliver what you called me here to do and then, let's talk. Let's get it over with so we can have our discussion." (*IIC*, 119).

Thus, after closing down CIDOC, Illich opened a new path in his intellectual quest, and he would not return to the issues analyzed in *Deschooling Society* until 1986. That year, in "A Plea for Research on Lay Literacy," he resituated his critique of schooling and education. By this time, he had come around to the view that there is a discourse that permeates both the individual and the institution. It is important, however, to pay attention to the intellectual journey Illich made in reaching that point, as well as to his understanding of learning, schooling, and education toward the end of his life.

#### TURNING POINTS: REPOSITIONING HIS CRITIQUE

At the end of the 1970s, Illich was engaged in a new search. He went to China, Japan, and India to learn the languages and to get some distance from the West in order to understand it from an outside perspective. He failed in his attempt to learn the languages and started to look for the roots of the certainties of modernity in the Western past (*IIC*, 120). He articulated his initial findings in his book *Gender*, which generated a very hostile reaction and became a personal landmark because it affected him so deeply.<sup>26</sup> We consider the situation surrounding *Gender* a turning point in his personal and intellectual life.

In *Gender*, Illich tried to find in the past and in anthropological studies what he called the transition from the proportionality of gender to the world of economic sex. At first reading, this does not strike one as a clear proposition. Illich used the notion of proportionality — that is, things that are different but still symmetrical — to convey the complementarity of the constitutive elements

---

25. CIDOC, *Catálogo de publicaciones* [Catalog of Publications] (Mexico: Centro Intercultural de Documentación, 1973).

26. Ivan Illich, *Gender* (New York: Marion Boyars, 1983).

of the cultural world and to introduce "gender" not as a social dimension of sex, but as a way of perceiving duality. As explained by Cayley, "the existence of one implies the other" (for example, earth and heaven); "existence is the result of a mutually constitutive complementarity between here and there" (*RNF*, 132). The idea of contingency (of constant creation by the will of God), while giving way to a discussion of correspondences between the micro and macro cosmos, also led to a notion of a world in which everything depends on God and is reducible to a basic homogeneity of oneness that undermined the traditional cosmology, which was gendered and considered the dualities of male and female, up and down, and the like to be irreducible (*RNF*, 132–133). These ideas and Illich's concern with the idea of oneness framed *Gender*.

He explained his thesis when invited to the University of California at Berkeley as a Regents Lecturer in September 1982.<sup>27</sup> Arlie Hochschild pointed out in her critique of *Gender* that the core of Illich's thesis was the notion that under "vernacular gender," dominant until the eleventh century, lives were gendered in space and time; there was no notion of a common humanity that transcended gender.<sup>28</sup> During the period between the eleventh century and the seventeenth century, this vernacular understanding of gender collapsed and was replaced by an economic notion of sex. Specifically, in a cash economy, the notion of gender collapsed, meaning that people were degendered, there was a unisex assumption, women and men could use the same tools, and envy became a problem. Under "vernacular gender" and within the frame of complementarity, in contrast, there were two forms of dominance: one kind among women and another among men. Illich tried to explain that the roles varied according to the specific cultural context; thus, a particular practice in one social context could be regarded as complementary, while in another context or under different historical circumstances, the same practice would not be complementary. According to Illich, the goal of equality had made women unequal;<sup>29</sup> this position generated strong reactions and rightly so. For Illich's readers, it is difficult to separate this understanding of duality from the Catholic patriarchal interpretation of human nature, with its binary dualistic theology and hierarchical character.<sup>30</sup>

The reaction on the part of feminist scholars was organized in the form of a symposium entitled "Beyond the Backlash: A Feminist Critique of Ivan Illich's Theory of Gender," published in the journal *Feminist Issues*. The critique, which took an interdisciplinary approach, was framed by the initial assumption that Illich was an original visionary and the subsequent realization that his messages

---

27. Gloria Bowles, "Introduction: The Context," *Feminist Issues* 3, no. 1 (1983): 3–6.

28. Arlie Hochschild, "Illich: The Ideologue in Scientist's Clothing," *Feminist Issues* 3, no. 1 (1983): 6–11.

29. Illich, *Gender*, 20.

30. For a broader understanding of this point, see Edward C. Whitmont, *Return of the Goddess* (New York: Crossroad, 1984).



regarding women were reactionary.<sup>31</sup> Arlie Hochschild summarized the following points regarding the views Illich expressed in *Gender*: (1) he argued that the efforts to promote gender equality have never benefited more than a tiny minority of women; (2) he maintained that men and women are fundamentally different in ways that are best characterized by the world of vernacular gender (civilization); and (3) he did not acknowledge male culture as part of the problem. In Illich's world, equality of women and men is not possible because of what he viewed as a universal difference: women do not have a place in the modern world, and men do not have a place in the core of home activities.<sup>32</sup> Other scholars participating in the symposium questioned his notion that vernacular gender relations are part of a natural order while the regime of economic sex is an "artifact of empire."<sup>33</sup> Robin Lakoff attacked the propagandistic techniques that she perceived as implicit in the text, while Barbara Christian pointed out the potential interpretive repercussions of Illich's understanding that humans are created as male and female and not as a human species.<sup>34</sup> Nancy Schaper-Hughes delineated the "procession of dualisms" permeating Illich's text, such as vernacular gender versus economic sex, spoken language versus taught mother tongue, spirit versus flesh, wholeness versus fragmentation, and so on.<sup>35</sup>

It is interesting that Schaper-Hughes compared Illich's theory of history to Michel Foucault's conception of history as a series of radical discontinuities, breaks, and ruptures. Illich argued that a gender complementarity (based on the notion of proportionality) was replaced by an entirely new and unrelated cultural era of genderless individualism that was founded on an understanding of history defined by scarcity and human needs. Illich declared that his intention had been to analyze the relations between women and men from a historical perspective without entering into normative politics. Cayley goes to some effort to explain how Illich's argument was misrepresented, and, moreover, he questions the quality of the argument made by Illich's critics.<sup>36</sup> The notion of scarcity and

---

31. Valentina Borremans and Jean Robert tried to clarify what Illich wanted to convey in *Gender* (published in Spanish under the title *El género vernáculo* [Vernacular Gender]): "Illich's really innovative idea was that feminine and masculine genders are historically asymmetrical and complementary. This asymmetric complementarity is reflected in the respective domains generated by the genders. In fact, the complementarity, which is vernacular gender, impregnated everything, épocas, places, postures, steps, ways of saying." Obviously, in our view, Borremans and Robert did not grasp the interpretive consequences of Illich's dualistic view in time and space. See Borremans and Robert, "Prefacio," 23–24.

32. Hochschild, "Illich: The Ideologue in Scientist's Clothing," 6–11.

33. Lillian B. Rubin, "On Gurus and Easy Solutions," *Feminist Issues* 3, no. 1 (1983): 11–14.

34. Robin Lakoff, "Illich as Text," and Barbara Christian, "Alternate Versions of the Gendered Past: African Women Writers vs. Illich," both in *Feminist Issues* 3, no. 1 (1983): 15–19 and 23–28, respectively.

35. Nancy Scheper-Hughes, "Vernacular Sexism: An Anthropological Response to Ivan Illich," *Feminist Issues* 3, no. 1 (1983): 28–37.

36. Cayley refers, for example, to Robin Lakoff's response in which she compares Illich's *Gender* to Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. Others accused Illich of portraying gender as part of the natural order when, as Cayley notes, "his whole argument depended on the recognition that gender was a vanishing

Illich's distrust of universalism — both on display in *Gender* — remain as major ideas in this analysis of education, as well as the understanding of proportionality that Illich developed further in relation to the parable of the Good Samaritan (see *RNF*, 50–51). He revisited the notion of proportionality in 1997 in an article honoring Leopold Kohr, where he stressed Kohr's notion of proportionality as the appropriateness of a relationship and emphasized the social creation of scarcity. Further, Illich discussed the accompanying historical fracture represented by the changes in those notions, which was reflected in the mode of perception and the character of desire, "with the good disappearing, to be replaced by value."<sup>37</sup> Proportionality, as we will discuss further later in this essay, was at the core of Illich's theological understanding of reality.<sup>38</sup>

After the controversy around *Gender*, a book that had clear links to his earlier publications of the 1970s, Illich gradually disappeared from the list of fashionable authors while he underwent an epistemological shift that was influenced by his awareness of the transition from a textual to a cybernetic image of the self (*IIC*, 37). He was motivated to explore how discourse permeated both the individual and the institution. He started to lecture at German universities on a casual basis, beginning with universities at Kassel and Marburg, and later at Oldenburg and Bremen. In the 1980s and 1990s, Illich spent his winters in Bremen. He also taught at Pennsylvania State University and Pitzer College in Chicago. During this period of Illich's life, particularly from the mid-1980s on, it is important to consider the intellectual milieu within which he was working. Apart from Illich's relation with Erich Fromm and their disagreements, he was influenced by philosopher of science Gastón Bachelard and his notion of epistemological breaks, French critic of technology Jacques Ellul, historian of religion and philosopher Mircea Eliade, and of course Michel Foucault (see *IIC*, 245, 110, 264, and 38). Illich turned his attention to new themes, such as the history of the alphabetization of the popular mind and a preoccupation with what various "tools" (that is, institutions such as education) say to people rather than what they do to society. The new direction and his new investigations led him to revise his conception of education as expounded in *Deschooling Society*.

Illich explored his own perception of the past in *H<sub>2</sub>O and the Waters of Forgetfulness*, published in 1985 and in lectures he delivered at conferences in the 1980s and 1990s, and he showed an interest in the relation between the present and the past when he investigated the "certainties of modernity" and how

---

and highly variable cultural construct." It was part of Illich's argument regarding the limits of growth (see *IIC*, 36).

37. Ivan Illich, "The Wisdom of Leopold Kohr," *Bulletin of Science, Technology, and Society* 17, no. 4 (1997): 164. Leopold Kohr (1909–1994) was the precursor of the "small is beautiful" theory that would be developed by Ernst Friedrich Schumacher. Kohr believed that the modern economy of scarcity made it impossible to set ethical parameters in commercial relations.

38. For an explanation of proportionality, see *RNF*, chaps. 9 and 17. In chapter 17, Illich discussed proportionality in relation to the parable of the Good Samaritan.

human beings are integrated into the systems generated by those "certainties."<sup>39</sup> Illich pointed out, when talking to Cayley, "sometime in the 1980s I began to think about these things differently. I realized that people were being absorbed or integrated into systems in a way that went beyond what I had at first thought. And I found the necessary rethinking very demanding" (*RNF*, 162). This new way of thinking allowed Illich to move toward an analysis of the conditions that allowed for the development of the first modern educational institutions in the Western world, institutions that in his view had become decadent by the end of the twentieth century.

Invited seminars and articles published in the 1980s, including his 1986 address, "A Plea for Research on Lay Literacy," were followed by the 1988 book *ABC: The Alphabetization of the Popular Mind* in which Illich, together with coauthor Barry Sanders, reexamined the effects of "alphabetization" on the building of Western certainties, including the need for education. The study of educational theories from this perspective requires attending to the epistemological ruptures represented by the movement from the world of orality (analyzed by Milman Parry, Albert Lord, Walter Ong, and Eric Havelock<sup>40</sup>) to the written world based on the alphabet (Greek) and the emergence of the alphabetic mentality and the related mental space in which pedagogical ideas are elaborated. Illich's analysis in "A Plea for Research on Lay Literacy" is relevant here. The notion of the alphabetic mentality (translated into English as "lay literacy" as opposed to clerical literacy) is different from the ability to read and write; it is, according to Illich, a "mind frame defined by a set of certainties that has spread within the realm of the alphabet since late medieval times" (*RLL*, 10). In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, text gradually stopped being a continuing row of letters, and instead the space between words was introduced. Due to the convergence of techniques of various origins — some Arabic, others classic — a new idea emerged: the page, which led to the modern text. The latter would be divided into chapters with titles, subtitles, numbering of lines, citations indicated by a different ink, and so on. These innovations allowed for a table of contents, thematic indexes, and reference to one or another paragraph (*RLL*, 14).

39. Thus, in his work on the history of water as stuff ("materia" in Spanish translation) — particularly in Ivan Illich, *H<sub>2</sub>O and the Waters of Forgetfulness: Reflections on the Historicity of Stuff* (Dallas, Texas: Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, 1985) — he provided an in-depth analysis of how water was imagined. As Lee Hoinacki claims, "H<sub>2</sub>O is about the disappearance of what Illich called 'stuff' and, specifically, water. It is replaced by H<sub>2</sub>O, often by recycled toilet flush. The new industrial product is essentially different from water." See Lee Hoinacki, "The Trajectory of Ivan Illich," *Bulletin of Science, Technology, and Society* 23, no. 5 (2002): 387.

40. The following is a sample of some of the most important research presented by these authors: Milman Parry, *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry*, ed. Adam Perry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971); Eric A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato (A History of the Greek Mind)* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1963); Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1960); and Walter J. Ong, *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology: Studies in the Interaction of Expression and Culture* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1971).

The composition of the page can be understood as a key event in relation to the beginning of modernity because it generates a new mentality and a new conception of individuality. Illich thought that within the alphabetic world, the page implied a profound reconstruction of individuality,<sup>41</sup> of lay consciousness and memory, as well as of the understanding of the past and the fear of facing the great book of the final judgment at the time of death (the notion of setting the record). These new aspects of individuality were shared, Illich wrote, by the lay world and the clerical world and were transmitted well beyond the universities and the scriptoria so that they permeated life at large. This is a point neglected by historians of education, Illich wrote, who centered their research on the evolution of reading and writing among clerics and interpreted this transformation of the mental space as a secondary result of the art of the chancelleries (*RLL*, 15). The study of the new forms deriving from the alphabetic mentality would provide historians of education, concerned with new ideas and techniques used by teachers, a fresh inspiration (*RLL*, 16). The modern version of educational discourse is construed within this new mentality. It is not coincidental, from Illich's point of view, that universities, which can be considered the first modern educational institutions in the Western world, are a public, open space, not a monastery. The page spread all over Western Europe very quickly and influenced thinkers who then used it as the frame of reference in their logic. For Illich, the page embodies the epistemological rupture (to use Bachelard's term) that led to the definition of modernity; it is the "axial metaphor" of modernity. The world that opens with the page allows for the conceptualization of modern pedagogy in the Western world, and Amos Comenius would provide the first modern pedagogical construction in his *Didactica Magna* (The Great Didactic), completed around 1631. Comenius advocated a structured education that would lead to perfection in the same way that the alchemist purified gold, while separating out those who were not suited for education.<sup>42</sup>

Illich aimed at understanding how people imagined their world during and across different historical moments — that is, how they construed their history and their subjectivity, related to the natural world, created institutions, and gave credibility to the certainties that legitimized their needs. Having this idea in mind, he identified and investigated "axial metaphors" that were at the core of the matrix of each social imaginary and embodied the movement to another moment. He identified epistemological ruptures that corresponded with the replacement of one metaphor by another. Thus, under the metaphors of the word, the page, and the screen, he delineated three great mutations in Western social imaginaries. The tools whose development advanced each metaphor and led to the reconstruction of the individual self and his or her place in the world are the alphabet, the bookish

---

41. This was represented by a new legal subject and a normative conception of persons; thus the spoken word or an oath was replaced by the written word and development of the notion of legal proof.

42. William Ideson Johnson, "Hermetic Alchemy as the Pattern for Schooling Seen by Ivan Illich in the Works of John Amos Comenius" (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 1973).

text, and communication and information technologies. The reconstruction of the self implied a rupture with consciousness, memory, the past, and, consequently, with identity.

During a presentation at the University of Toronto in 1990, Illich invited his audience to think about the present from a new perspective, walking as a crab from the present to the past, with eyes fixed on the screen, in order to understand the crisis of modernity.<sup>43</sup> It was historiography seen from the eyes of a crab. He borrowed the crab "parable," as he called it, from Ludolf Kuchenbuch. Interestingly, this approach has a parallel in Foucault's notion of the history of the present: according to him, we must see the new in the present, not through the eyes of the past or the eyes of the future. Both Illich and Foucault try to uncover (as Foucault put it) the deeper strata of Western culture.

However, there is a dimension of Illich's project that cannot be neglected. His complex search in the 1980s and 1990s can only be understood as part of his own spiritual-theological journey, a journey that Lee Hoinacki defined as an apophatic theological positioning.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, Illich was a man of faith talking to a world where faith did not have a place, and in this world, he talked from his faith without revealing that this was the source of his words.<sup>45</sup> *Deschooling Society* was in fact his first apophatic attempt after he had encountered problems with the Vatican. In that apophatic exercise, when he talked of education, he was analogically talking of faith, and when he talked of schools, he was talking of the Church as an institution.

Illich's late work caught the attention of Charles Taylor, who did not miss the Christian element in Illich's thought. Taylor said that the place of Christianity in the rise of Western modernity had been a theme under discussion for more than a century, with its role sometimes minimized and other times overemphasized. Some saw in modernity, Taylor wrote, the realization of Christian ideals; others who hate the modern world defined Christianity as its antithesis — there were mixes and matches in different combinations. But "Illich changes the very terms of the debate. For him, modernity is neither the fulfillment nor the antithesis of Christianity but its *perversion*. The link between ancient religion and present reality is affirmed, but not necessarily to the benefit of either."<sup>46</sup> Illich's understanding of history, his late critique of education as discourse (as well as his

---

43. Illich, "Mnemosine," 578.

44. The apophatic theology rejects theological understanding as a path to God. It is a negative theology that assumes that the Divine cannot be apprehended and can only be analyzed as something different from God. Hoinacki points out, "I do not think one can characterize Illich with any conventional label, whether that be of an academic discipline, such as sociologist, or a descriptive adjective, such as conservative. . . . It is my contention that, given the trajectory of his life, his bios or curriculum vitae, the principal analytical concept giving intelligibility to the way he lived, to what he said and wrote, is his apophatic theological stance" (Hoinacki, "The Trajectory of Ivan Illich," 384).

45. See Javier Sicilia, "Prefacio" [Preface], in *Iván Illich: Obras Reunidas*, vol. 2, 19.

46. Charles Taylor, "Foreword," in Cayley, *The Rivers North of the Future*, ix.

early critique in *Deschooling Society*), and his understanding of free learning were integral to his search for freedom in God.

ILLICH: THE PAST, THE CRITIQUE OF EDUCATION AS  
A DISCOURSE, AND FREE LEARNING

After a hiatus of many years, Illich went back to his early work on education. During this period of his intellectual life, education was one of the certainties that Illich critiqued as being the result of tools (institutions) shaping our view of reality. In 1986, he wrote,

To make my plea for this novel research plausible, I will explain the steps which led me to my present position. This I will do by criticizing my own *Deschooling Society* for its naïve views. My travelogue begins sixteen years ago, at a point when that book was about to appear. During the nine months the manuscript was at the publishers, I grew more and more dissatisfied with its texts. This misapprehension I owe to Cass Canfield, Harper's owner, who named my baby, and, in doing so, misrepresented my thoughts.... Since then my curiosity and reflections have focused on the historical circumstances under which the very idea of educational needs can arise. (*RLL*, 11).

In the foreword he wrote in 1995 for Matt Hern's edited collection, *Deschooling Our Lives*, Illich pointed to three moments in his intellectual journey, starting with the publication of *Deschooling Society*. The first moment, having his understanding of education as the point of reference, includes the texts that would become *Deschooling Society* in 1971. In this book, written at the peak of the expansion of modern educational institutions, Illich articulated a radical critique of schools and the idea of progress. He made a plea for the urgent need to liberate education from the monopoly of schooling, but he also proposed avenues and actions to work toward a world without schools. Drawing on his understanding of the process of the historical institutionalization of the Catholic Church, he was able to demonstrate in his critique of schooling how many of its mythologized rituals had originated in a process of secularization. Toward the middle of the twentieth century, as the Church lost believers and the new faith in schooling became evident, the schools monopolized the possibilities of education in the same way that the Church had progressively come to dominate spiritual life in the Western world during the previous twenty centuries. His emphasis on this parallelism was such that he neglected the connections that schools and educational institutions have with their social, cultural, political, and economic contexts. About this first moment, Illich wrote, "I called for the disestablishment of schools for the sake of improving education and here, I noticed, made my mistake. Much more important than the disestablishment of schools, I began to see, was the reversal of those trends that make of education a pressing need rather than a gift of gratuitous leisure."<sup>47</sup>

The second moment in Illich's intellectual journey occurred in the five years following the publication of *Deschooling Society*, when he realized that even liberating education from the state's monopoly would not be enough because

---

47. Illich, "Foreword," viii.



the state and the modern industrial society had a variety of "educational" tools designed to put people's views in conformance with dominant ideology. The texts Illich wrote just after *Deschooling Society* was published were to an extent a response to the criticism of that book. In a paper he presented at the 1971 Christian Education World Assembly in Lima, Peru, entitled "La Desescolarización de la Iglesia" (Deschooling the Church), Illich stressed how the fundamental aspects of modern society have been inculcated through schooling (for example, by means of methods of instruction accumulating canned life) while also denouncing the pseudoreligious character of "education."<sup>48</sup> He prepared the terrain for understanding education as one of the certainties of modernity. In this sense, his critique in *Deschooling Society* would not mean much without differentiating education from learning — the latter being planned, measurable, and imposed on another person. About this second moment Illich pointed out,

Largely through the help of my friend and colleague Wolfgang Sachs, I came to see that the educational function was already emigrating from the schools and that, increasingly, other forms of compulsory learning would be instituted in modern society. It would become compulsory not by law, but by other tricks such as making people to pay huge amounts of money in order to be taught how to have better sex, how to be more sensitive, how to know more about the vitamins they need, how to play games, and so on. This talk of "lifelong learning" and "learning needs" has thoroughly polluted society, and not just schools, with the stench on education.<sup>49</sup>

In the third moment of his intellectual journey, during the 1980s and 1990s, Illich questioned the discourse behind the notion of educational needs, learning needs, and preparation for life (that is, lifelong learning). This third moment, neglected by historians, is of interest here. In fact, Illich realized then that when he wrote *Deschooling Society*, the social effects rather than the historical substance of education were at the core of his interest. Illich reflected that, in the past, he had called into question schooling as a desirable means but not as a desirable end. As he wrote in 1995, "I still accepted that, fundamentally, educational needs of some kind were an historical given of human nature. I no longer accept this today."<sup>50</sup> In addition, during this third moment, Illich critiqued educational institutions without a particular aim beyond critique, providing no alternative and even rejecting the alternatives that he had proposed in *Deschooling Society*. It is a creative critique without an ulterior response and with an ahistorical touch, which makes his later readings difficult to analyze, particularly in relation to schooling. It is difficult to use Illich's critique as a transforming tool. Furthermore, his understanding should be read again in the context of his understanding of learning as a search for freedom in God and his reading of the parable of the Good Samaritan, which we will analyze later.

48. Ivan Illich, "La desescolarización de la Iglesia," 116–124.

49. Illich, "Foreword," viii.

50. Ibid., ix.

As he shifted focus from schooling to education, from the process to its orientation, Illich reflected in the 1980s, "I came to understand education as 'acquired knowledge' under conditions that postulate scarcity of the means to acquire it" (*RLL*, 12). In fact, his understanding that humans naturally belonged to the species *homo educandus* weakened when he studied economic conceptions and, in particular, when he read Karl Polanyi. From this perspective, the need for education as planned learning, which Illich seemed to equate with instruction and transmission of knowledge, was the result of ideas and arrangements that make the means for insertion in the school web scarce. The "educational rituals" reinforced faith in the value of knowledge acquired under conditions of scarcity. Illich further questioned the construction of ideals that could be educational aims and the pursuit of the ideal of the educated person.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is central to Illich's thinking. In the parable, Illich found an example to illustrate how human relations have changed since God's message was revealed. His central point is that while Jesus tried to respond to the question, "Who is my neighbor?" modern thought interpreted the parable as how one should behave toward one's neighbor (*RNF*, 50). We can transfer this to education in the sense that it implies a duty and breaks with God's message that gives us the freedom to choose the fellow humans with whom we wish to associate beyond artificial constraints, such as the creation of a particular community — in other words, my neighbor is who I choose, not who I must choose. In Illich's interpretation, there is no way of categorizing who my neighbor ought to be. He believed that such an interpretation is the opposite of what Jesus wanted to point out. He had not been asked how one should behave toward one's neighbor but rather, who is my neighbor?

Perhaps the only way we could recapture it today could be to imagine the Samaritan as a Palestinian ministering to a wounded Jew. He is someone who not only goes outside his ethnic preference for taking care of his own kind but who commits a kind of treason by caring for his enemy. In so doing he exercises a freedom of choice whose radical novelty has often been overlooked. (*RNF*, 50–51).

This story represents the possibility of breaking with the ethical boundaries and exercising freedom of choice, having God as referent. Within the context of the history of proportionality, the parable elevates this notion to a level that had not been perceived before. Illich said that "nothing can exist without being dysymmetrically proportional to something else and that this dysymmetric proportionality is the reason for the existence of both" (*RNF*, 197). He went on to say, "'I' precisely because of you, by allowing me to love you, give me the possibility to be co-relative to you, to be dysymmetrically proportionate to you. I see, therefore, in love, hope, and charity the crowning of the proportional nature of creation in the full, old sense of that term" (*RNF*, 197).

This led to Illich's revised thinking about education, since freedom of choice became more and more institutionalized and reached its zenith with compulsory schooling — the obligation to be in touch with others instead of exercising free choice in the selection. As a result, Illich claimed that the schools would exemplify a perversion of the parable and its Christian message:

In earlier talks I tried to make it plausible that the Christian message explosively expands the scope of love by inviting us to love whomever we choose. There is a new freedom involved, and a new confidence in one's freedom. I also tried to establish that this new freedom makes a new type of betrayal possible. The way I was led to frame this hypothesis was by observing the modern mania for education and then concluding that the only way it can be explained is as the fruit of a 2,000-year institutionalization of the catechetical, or instructional, function of the Christian community, which has led us to believe that only through explicit teaching and through rituals in which teaching has a major part can we become fit for the community in which we ought to live. (*RNF*, 145).

Charles Taylor also refers to Illich's interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan to explain the "great disembedding" that opened doors to another kind of solidarity beyond sacred social boundaries. Taylor acknowledges that it was, in a sense, a "corruption" of the Gospel as expounded by Illich, since we did not get "a network of agape but rather a disciplined society in which categorical relations have primacy, and therefore norms."<sup>51</sup> Illich's radical negation of any ideal led him to argue that only God can inspire human action and, further, that in a direct relationship with each human being, one can find God in the other. He critiqued education from an apophatic perspective; education as he understood it — as planned learning — is a barrier between the individual who wishes to learn and the other, having in mind that the other is God.

Therefore, Illich explicitly distinguished the history of education from the history of *homo educandus*. The history of education, he argued, assumed that education is inherent to human existence, a historical given; he rejected this idea along with its concomitant understanding that in every human culture there is a stock of knowledge that has to be transmitted from generation to generation.<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, the history of *homo educandus* studied the steps through which education as necessity (need) came into existence historically: "The history of *homo educandus* deals with the emergence of a social reality within which 'education' [planned learning] is perceived as a basic human need."<sup>53</sup> From this perspective, Illich wrote, the "need" for education appears as a result of societal beliefs and arrangements that make the means for so-called socialization scarce. He went on to say,

I began to notice that educational rituals reflected, reinforced, and actually created belief in the value of learning pursued under conditions of scarcity. Such beliefs, arrangements, and rituals, I came to see, could easily survive and thrive under the rubrics of deschooling, free schooling, or homeschooling (which, for the most part, are limited to the commendable rejection of authoritarian methods).<sup>54</sup>

As institutions developed, administered, and categorized the encounter among fellow humans and the learning process, the sense of scarcity became dominant.

51. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 158.

52. Ivan Illich, "The History of *Homo Educandus*" (1984), in *In the Mirror of the Past*.

53. *Ibid.*, 113.

54. Illich, "Foreword," ix.

These institutions would thus be a consequence of the process of corruption of the Gospel and of the notion of hospitality; they remove from the individual the Christian responsibility. As a result, Illich wrote the following about *Deschooling Society* in his late years:

If people are seriously to think about deschooling their life, and not just escape from the corrosive effects of compulsory schooling, they could do no better than to develop the habit of setting a mental question mark beside all discourse on young people's "educational needs" or "learning needs," or about their need for a "preparation for life." I would like them to reflect on the historicity of these very ideas. Such reflection would take the new crop of deschoolers a step further from where the younger and somewhat naïve Ivan was situated, back when talk of "deschooling" was born.<sup>55</sup>

### CONCLUSION

One can do a postmodern reading of Illich's work (some of his ideas are not far from Foucault's) and, at the same time, a Catholic nonmagisterial (beyond the Vatican's teaching) reading of his work. In his younger years, Illich was in touch with the nouvelle théologie and he had known some of its representatives such as Jean Daniélou, Jacques Maritain, and Gerhart Ladner (author of the *The Ideas of Reform*), who developed neo-Thomism and paved the way for Vatican II ideas.<sup>56</sup> But Illich went beyond these thinkers because he questioned the certainties of modernism and denounced the "corruption" of the Gospel. Illich cannot be understood without considering his theological background, which takes an apophatic character in his writing. His understanding of the parable of the Good Samaritan is central to his overall thinking, particularly in relation to his notion of the past and his critique of education in the 1980s and 1990s. Within this understanding we situate his concept of proportionality (dysymmetrical proportionality and complementarity).

*Deschooling Society* needs to be examined in light of Illich's early clarifications, but also in relation to the three shifting moments that he himself identified as important in his intellectual journey. The first moment (and we focus on education) is embodied in *Deschooling Society*, an apophatic text in which he advocated the liberation of the school from the state and proposed possible alternatives. The second moment, which occurred during the years immediately following the publication of *Deschooling Society*, corresponds with Illich's denunciation of the pseudoreligious character of education and his increasing awareness of how the educational functions were migrating from schools. He certainly started to move toward understanding education as one of the certainties of modernity during this period. His most significant epistemological and personal shift, however, occurred in the 1980s, opening what he identified as the third moment within an emerging intellectual context with which he was an active interlocutor. At this point, he no longer accepted the notion of educational needs, and, inspired by Karl Polanyi, he developed an understanding

---

55. *Ibid.*, x.

56. Gerhart Ladner, *The Ideas of Reform: Its Impact on Christian Thought and Action in the Age of the Fathers* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1960).

of knowledge acquired under conditions of scarcity. His critique of educational institutions during this period did not have a particular aim beyond critique; he did not propose alternatives of any kind. His critique of education as one of the certainties of modernity is intertwined with his analysis of the parable of the Good Samaritan and his belief that modernity is an outcome of corrupted Christianity. Theologically, Illich was both orthodox and iconoclast.<sup>57</sup> In the third moment of his intellectual journey, he searched for the roots of our "certainties" and identified epistemological ruptures embodied in three axial metaphors — the word, the page, and the screen — that, he maintained, represented three major changes in the Western social imaginary.

Helga Ramsey-Kurz not only related Illich's work to that of poststructuralist thinkers such as Marshall McLuhan and Jacques Derrida, but she identified him explicitly as one who opened avenues that would lead to a new understanding of illiteracy by attending to the poststructuralist call for a less Eurocentric and more critical and comprehensive examination of literacy:

In the *Alphabetization of the Popular Mind* (1988), Ivan Illich and Barry Sanders, for instance, re-examine the effects of literalization on Western notions of truth, reality, and fiction. They reconstruct the gradual invalidation of the spoken word following the advancement and growing authority of writing in Western cultures and document how this authority was asserted in most spheres of human coexistence.<sup>58</sup>

It is important to note, however, that Illich found in postmodernist theories a method for critiquing modernity and, to a certain extent, for going back to premodernity. His aim was the free encounter with God, that is, his goal was to liberate the message of God from the modernity that had led to the institutionalization of this message. According to Illich, the school, like the Catholic Church, is institutionalized and hence perverts the free encounter of those learning.

Illich did not intend to write scholarly pieces in the conventional sense; he was oblivious to most contemporary scholarly production in history or in education, although he was very familiar with major intellectual currents and he had a sophisticated understanding and knowledge of Western history, particularly medieval history. Contemporary pedagogues trying to implement his ideas often fail to consider his entire body of work and instead focus on various moments in his intellectual journey in isolation. This is particularly unfortunate because Illich's originality resides more in the critique and the methodological perspective that he articulated in the 1980s and 1990s, which scholars have not analyzed at all, than in the lines of action that he proposed in books such as *Deschooling Society*. During this third period of his development, he provided epistemological tools that merit examination by those who study his pedagogical thinking today.

---

57. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 737.

58. Helga Ramsey-Kurz, *The Non-Literate Other: Readings of Illiteracy in Twentieth-Century Novels in English* (New York: Rodopi, 2007), 35.

In the last stage of his life, Illich did not seem to be willing to go beyond a critique of certainties into suggestions for practice. This is encapsulated in what he said to Cayley at the end of his recorded testimony: "I hope nobody takes what I said for answers" (*RNF*, 229). Furthermore, although postmodernist and poststructuralist pedagogues may consider Illich an appealing author, it is important to keep in mind that the objective of his critique of modernity was to "save" the message and the grace of God that had been perverted by modernity.