

Editor's letter

Marianne and Reimer Gronemeyer knew Illich well. With a group of close friends, they run the *Stiftung Convivial* in Wiesbaden, Germany. It houses the best Illich archive in the world. The collection is exhaustive, chronologically arranged, and readily available to visitors. The materials are distributed across filing cabinets and bookshelves in one large room that looks out through ample windows on a mostly quiet city street.

In late June this year, Marianne and her friends hosted a three-day symposium on the future of the *Thinking After Ivan Illich* project, of which this periodical is one element. About twenty-five persons ranging in age from the mid-twenties to the mid-eighties, from New Zealand to Argentina, passed the hours in intense discussion and, occasionally, spirited debate. It is difficult to summarize the range of subjects discussed, usually in English but with enough German, Italian, French, and even the odd Swedish phrase to demand that each strain towards understanding the other. Sometimes slight changes indicate big shifts of direction —one fruit of the discussions is that the project is now named *Thinking with Ivan Illich*.

The Stiftung also hosted a three-day gathering for about fifty persons in the nearby small town of Friesenheim, Germany, where the Gronemeyers' make their home in a converted railway station. Strewn across the green and pebbled courtyard of a country manor, participants debated papers, many of which appear in this volume among the thematic articles on Nature.

It is impossible to capture in words the spirit of friendship that quickly formed under the aegis of our gener-

ous hosts. Suffice it to say that the eating, drinking, singing, laughing, cooking, and dishwashing that suffused these hours proved the Stiftung is well-named.

On one of those days, Reimer wanted a few of us to see the photograph of “Hermine” reproduced in the first essay. I invited him to tell us a bit about her. His essay is short and hard-hitting. Hermine is a one-hundred-and-one-year-old Namibian who lives mostly outside the reach of the economy, which now swaddles some of us in numberless goods and services. Hermine’s condition was that of most humans throughout recorded history and still is for the majority. The fully serviced human is an anomaly that is destined to disappear.

The second essay explores the question of whether Illich’s arguments in *Tools for Conviviality* remain relevant as what its author, Carlos Tornel, calls the ‘civilizational crisis’ deepens. He recognizes that the forces that disembedded Hermine from her way of life are still at work. Now, under the guise of greening the economy, the rate of industrialization continues to accelerate even as it destroys the social milieu and the natural environment. The unchecked spread of the economy is animated by the imperative to provide everyone with a comfortable life. In the spirit of Illich, Tornel says this demand is a perversion of the parable of the Samaritan. And, like Illich, Tornel believes only our cleaving close to the unsullied ‘hospitality’ and ‘radical plurality’ embodied by the Samaritan will save us from our predicament.

Renee Uribe echoes the two-sided possibility of the Samaritan by probing the distinction, in Illich, between the institutional church and the Church as the mystical body of Christ. Resisting the spread of the former requires strengthening the bonds of the latter, an appreciation for which, says Uribe, ‘maternal-thinking’ can bolster. Like Tornel, Uribe has been influenced by Gustavo Esteva, but also others to nurture ‘mutuality’—a way of relating to others premised on preserv-

ing differences rather than forcing sameness.

Different from the three essays described above are the eleven articles that address the question of Nature. They have benefited from the discussions at Friesenheim, and the point-counterpoint of speech and writing seems a better way to think with Illich. The first article is a serendipitous exception. Agamben had written his piece on Illich's 'snail theorem' unaware of the call for articles. But the coincidence was too timely to not include it in this volume.. Technology—the snail's shell—has grown to a scale that threatens to bury us—the snail. Artificial Intelligence (AI) does not herald the intelligence of machines as much as the 'stupidity of man' who can no longer see, much less judge, when what he has created to cocoon him has begun to crush him.

Illich discovered 'amoeba words' in writing Deschooling Society (1971). Some two decades later, he encouraged his friend and German linguist, Uwe Pörksen, to write a book on the topic, which was published in English as *Plastic Words: The Tyranny of a Modular Language*. The second article reprints a conversation between Bernard Pörksen, Uwe's son, and Joseph Weizenbaum on the image of man in discussions about AI. The father described the dissolution of some words into senseless 'communication units.' The son interviewed the noted computer scientist, who cautioned against AI for symbolically reducing humans into "calculable and formalizable processes." AI dis-integrates human life by identifying thinking with computation. It was not the robots and AI machines of the future that concerned Weizenbaum. Rather, it is the symbolic effects of understanding of humans as computational machines that shook Weizenbaum to his core.

Luis Xavier's article on nature in Islamic theology and philosophy is unusual for these pages in two ways. First, it is a learned primer on the history of some key concepts—space, time, motion, matter—that inform modern natural science.

Xavier examines these concepts in the context of the historical dispute between monotheistic theology and philosophy. Whereas the former insisted on the divine creation of the world *ex nihilo*, the latter presupposed the eternity of the world. Second, in referring to the Islamic uptake of Aristotelian science before that became anathema in the West, Xavier opens a window into what technoscience has overthrown in its continuing attempt to reshape nature.

Giovanna Morelli is preoccupied with the issue of technoscience run amok. In her Illich-inspired reading, she argues that the systemic epistemology of Gregory Bateson is not a departure from but a deepening of Cartesian mechanical philosophy. Echoing Weizenbaum, Morelli emphasizes the anti-human implication of the systems-theory understanding of man as a “self-recursive communication system.” Such cybernetic visions not only turn words but also human beings into plastic—configured as a set of “manipulable micro-components” managed by “a power exercised by man against the very ontology of man.”

Morelli suggests that Illich and Bateson agreed that image of man in science is demeaning but disagreed about the cure. Leonardo Glenewinkel uncovers a similar dynamic in his study of the relationship between Illich and Vilém Flusser. Both keenly felt the oncoming void beneath their feet after Auschwitz and Hiroshima. Flusser used the example of an uprooted plant placed in a vase to underscore his argument for the sense of ‘absurd’ as being without roots. Whereas Flusser thought this groundlessness could be combated by a new and conscious use of technology, Illich pleaded for guarding the senses against technogenic dissolution.

The next three articles are at once historical and contemporary. Jose-Antonio Ullate confronts the reader with a masterful contrast between the answers of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas to the question of why humans live together. For

Aristotle, living together was the expression of either the natural drive to procreate or the natural inclination to celebrate the pursuit of the good life. Despite his overt homage to Aristotle, Thomas radically departs from him by positing man as a naturally needy animal—unprotected against the elements, defenseless against predators and aggressors—to explain living together. The reasons for their difference are just as fundamental as the contemporary consequences of these positions are momentous, both of which Ullate documents at length.

Nicola Labanca and Christophe Kotanyi have previously contributed to *Conspiratio*. For this issue, Labanca not only offers his translation of Illich's *The Social Construction of Energy* but also his commentary on 'energy' inspired by it. A trained physicist, Labanca notes that 'energy' is a term that even Nobel laureates have confessed to not understanding. He emphasizes that energy is not a thing but rather something imputed to specific transformation processes—a plane flying, a woman running, and so on. If Labanca prompts us to suspect the validity of such ruling ideas as the 'need for energy,' which seem to drive much of global politics, then Kotanyi, the astrophysicist, invites us to doubt the scientific enterprise itself. For him, scientific knowledge is founded on insensible notions—gravity, photons, and the like—and therefore beyond independent verification through experience. Moreover, he asserts that science is fraudulent when, like the science of the Big Bang and black holes, it implicitly assumes a harmony between the contradictory theories of quantum mechanics and the theory of relativity. Technoscience has thus turned against its maker, who is diminished in stature and feels shame in front of his dazzlingly incomprehensible creations.

The last three articles in this issue devoted to the question of nature strike a different key. In a piece of excellent philosophical phenomenology, Lapo Chittaro carries the reader into the depths of what he calls 'the encountering body.' He

says the eyes, mouth, heart, and viscera anchor the encounter between you and me that is also open to a third. Chittaro's sentences reveal the abyss separating scientific descriptions of man and his lived reality; the chasm between "recursive communication systems" and participants in a hospitable atmosphere. Seonaid Abernethy shares her work as a lawyer who fights to make room for restorative justice within the interstices of criminal law. Her account of the efforts of defendants and plaintiffs to transcend the letter of the law by discovering the spirit of justice is a bracing response to the call by Italo Calvino in *Invisible Cities* to give room to "who and what in the midst of inferno, are not inferno." Sometimes, the who and what do not assume human form. Sometimes, we encounter them as dung beetles. In the last article on the theme of this volume, Marianne Gronemeyer convinces us that she encountered the dancing dung beetles because their ability to reveal themselves was dynamically connected to her ability to suffer them. Marianne says that one suffers or bears another only when one stops and listens to them.

This may well be the nature of things. The world discloses itself only to those who, like Hermine, can bear it.

Sajay Samuel
October 2024
State College, PA