

THE PROPHET OF CUERNAVACA

IVAN ILLICH AND THE
CRISIS OF THE WEST

A black and white photograph of Ivan Illich, an older man with grey hair, wearing a dark shirt. He is looking slightly to the left with a gentle smile. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be a bookshelf.

TODD HARTCH

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For Peter

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ABBREVIATIONS

AID	Association of International Development
AFL-CIO	American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations
CDF	Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith of the Catholic Church
CELAM	Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericana (Latin American bishops' conference)
CENFI	Centro de Formação Intercultural, Center of Intercultural Formation, Brazilian version of CIF in Petropolis, opened in 1961 under John Vogel
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CIC	Centro de Investigaciones Culturales (Cultural Research Center, briefly part of CIF, c. 1965)
CICOP	Catholic Inter-American Cooperation Program
CIASP	Conference on Interamerican Student Projects
CIDAL	Centro de Investigaciones para el Desarrollo de América Latina (Research Center for Latin American Development, briefly part of CIF, c. 1965)
CIDOC	Centro Intercultural de Documentación (Intercultural Documentation Center, Ivan Illich's "open university" in Cuernavaca, Mexico; founded in 1963 as part of CIF, it became the dominant institution in 1965)
CIF	Center for Intercultural Formation (Ivan Illich's training center in Cuernavaca, Mexico, for missionaries to Latin America, incorporated March 3, 1961, first course June 19, 1961)

ABBREVIATIONS

CIP	Centro de Investigaciones Pastorales
CM	Carl Mitcham private collection, Alamo, Colorado
CUA	Catholic University of America
FUL	Fordham University Library
ICLAS	Institute of Contemporary Latin American Studies (part of CIDOC)
IU	Indiana University
ISPLA	Instituto Superior de Pastoral Latino Americano
LAB	Latin America Bureau of the National Catholic Welfare Conference
MMA	Maryknoll Mission Archive
NCCB	National Conference of Catholic Bishops (organization of the bishops of the United States, 1966–2001)
NCWC	National Catholic Welfare Conference (organization of the bishops of United States, 1919–66)
ND	University of Notre Dame
NDJD	John Dearden collection at University of Notre Dame
PAVLA	Papal Volunteers for Latin America
USCC	U.S. Catholic Conference (organization of the bishops of the United States in collaboration with other U.S. Catholics, 1966–2001)
UTC	Urban Training Center (urban ministry center in Chicago run by James Morton)

THE PROPHET OF CUERNAVACA

INTRODUCTION

In April 1968 Ivan Illich spent several hours listening to the experiences of thirty American college students who had returned from volunteer projects in Mexico. The students were part of the Conference on Inter-american Student Projects (CIASP), an organization started by Maryknoll missionaries, and they had invited Illich to their training session at Saint Mary of the Lake Seminary in Illinois. Illich charmed the students with his aristocratic bearing, deep knowledge of Latin America, and evident interest in their service in Mexico.

When Illich began his formal speech, however, his manner changed. “Only radical change,” he said, “could possibly justify a decent human being in 1969 continuing his association with CIASP.” In fact, he now seemed to view his audience as a collection of complacent hypocrites. “Today,” he continued, “the existence of organizations like yours is offensive to Mexico. I wanted to make this statement in order to explain why I feel sick about it all and in order to make you aware that good intentions have not much to do with what we are discussing here. To hell with good intentions.”

His point was that good will was not enough, that the students had to evaluate their impact on Mexico. In his mind Americans could not avoid being “vacationing salesmen for the middle-class ‘American Way of Life’” because of their “abysmal lack of intuitive delicacy.” He wanted the volunteers to know that their way of life was “not alive enough to be shared.” Their only impact in Mexico would be the creation of “disorder” because they would be like a white man “preaching to the black slaves on a plantation in Alabama.” “It is incredibly unfair,” he concluded, “for you to impose yourselves on a village where you are so linguistically deaf and dumb that you

don't even understand what you are doing or what people think of you."¹

A year later and 1,500 miles to the south, Harvey Cox, a Harvard professor of religion and author of *The Secular City*, was having a very different experience of Illich. Cox loved teaching a course called "Religious and Social Change in Latin and North America" at CIDOC, the Centro Intercultural de Documentación, a think tank and free university that Illich had created in Cuernavaca, Mexico. "It was the most interesting bunch of students I've had in all my years of teaching," Cox said. He was especially impressed by "a very brilliant, very radical French nun who had worked for years in the Mexican slums," "a Panamanian priest also deeply involved in social work," and "a young Maryknoll seminarian from the Middle West who was probably the most radical man I've ever met." Even better, at night, when Cox retired to his room to work on his latest book, Illich would stop by to ask Cox to read his last three sentences; then Illich would make "apt and dazzling" comments and "would conjure historical analogies out of the air, suggest alternative phrasing, pose probing questions."²

Both experiences were characteristic of Illich. From 1961 to 1975, he became an increasingly controversial social critic and his base in Cuernavaca, just south of Mexico City, became a pilgrimage site for intellectuals, scholars, missionaries, and students from all over the world. They came to Illich's center to learn Spanish, to attend seminars on topics ranging from education to transportation, and to sit at the feet of Illich, a Roman Catholic priest whose relentless criticism of the Catholic Church and modern Western culture resonated with the revolutionary spirit of the times. After devoting his energies to a missionary training program in the early 1960s, Illich wrote a remarkable series of books in the 1970s that gained him a large audience outside of the Church: *Deschooling Society* (1970), which rejected the modern educational system; *Celebration of Awareness: A Call for Institutional Revolution* (1971); *Tools for Conviviality* (1973); *Energy and Equity* (1974); and *Medical Nemesis* (1976), with its famous opening, "The medical establishment has become a major threat to health."³ These works were only the tip of the iceberg, for Illich's friends and companions applied his

ideas in dozens, perhaps hundreds of projects, in a host of disciplines. A partial list of those influenced by Illich and CIDOC includes Peter Berger, the eminent sociologist and theorist of secularization; educator Paulo Freire of Brazil; psychoanalyst Erich Fromm; liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez; and Jerry Brown, governor of California.

THE MAN

In 1956, before Illich was famous, fellow priest Joseph Fitzpatrick had noticed the “amazing potentialities” of John Illich, as he was then known, and speculated that he might soon be “influencing high-level policy on the widest possible scope.” But Fitzpatrick also feared for his friend: “He has always impressed me as a man who must work quietly, informally, behind the scenes. I am afraid that, if he were given an official position where his remarks might be interpreted as possible policy, where people would begin to analyze the political implications of what he says, etc., his influence might be seriously hampered . . . John is not the kind of man who moves smoothly. He does things in a way that can easily antagonize people.”⁴ Fitzpatrick was correct about both the influence and the antagonism, as the next chapter demonstrates.

“He’s an extraordinarily intelligent man,” said Fitzpatrick in 1969. “He likes to have intelligent people at his side and he finds it difficult to hide his disdain for what he considers stupidity. He’s a polyglot genius who speaks nine languages almost without an accent and he’s a cosmopolitan who feels at home anywhere in Europe or the Western Hemisphere. He was educated in Rome for a career in the Vatican, so he knows canon law, diplomacy, and church politics perfectly, to the degree that he often makes intelligent clerics feel like children. He devours books and reads more in a night than most people could read in a week. He can be extremely cordial when it’s appropriate, but he can also respond with ridicule or, even worse, contempt. He punishes himself with work to the extent that psychiatrists have called him a masochist. In the same way, he punishes those who work with him. If someone, despite good intentions, hinders

the development that he believes is necessary for the Church and if the situation calls for a fight, he thinks that he should always fight. He is, and will always be, a sign of contradiction and a focus of controversy.”⁵

Still, at his best, Illich could be an attractive and compelling figure, as writer Francine du Plessix Gray found when she encountered him at his center in Mexico: “Ivan Illich, tall, aquiline, smiling affably, gesticulating with long gangling arms, conversing in five languages at once, walks swiftly through the rooms of CIDOC, an elegant Palladian villa in the flowered hills above Cuernavaca . . . He smiles and throws back his shock of long black hair with a boyish gesture. When smiling, Ivan Illich looks like the young Voltaire: long-faced; beak-nosed; the deep-set brown eyes both gentle and cynical; the mysterious wide mouth curving up in a sarcastic, knowing smile, a little kinder and more ingenuous than Voltaire’s.”⁶

Ivan Dinko Illich was born in 1926 in Vienna and grew up there and at his grandfather’s estate on the island of Brac, off the Adriatic coast of Dalmatia. His father Piero, an aristocratic Croatian, and his mother Ellen, a German from a family of Jewish converts to Catholicism, introduced him to intellectuals such as theologian Jacques Maritain, vitalist Ludwig Klages, poet Rainer Maria Rilke, and esoteric philosopher Rudolf Steiner. During World War II he was classified as a half-Aryan as long as his father was alive, but when his father died he and his family had to flee to Italy. In Florence, Illich finished high school at the Liceo Scientifico Leonardo da Vinci and then studied chemistry and crystallography at the local university, mainly to obtain an identification card under a false name. He also cared for his mother and younger twin brothers and joined the resistance.⁷ Because of his fluency in German, he managed to wheedle information from German officers. In one case, he learned of German plans to remove livestock from Italy as they withdrew. He then moved as many cows as possible into the mountains, where they could be hidden and saved. “It wasn’t tremendously heroic activity,” he said, “but since then I have been rooted on the outside. Resistance came natural. And it stayed natural, developing into resistance against the use of religion in politics, resistance against

education which degrades more people than it privileges, resistance against progress which creates more ‘basic needs’ than it can possibly satisfy.”⁸

In 1944 Illich decided to become a priest, for reasons that remain murky. As a youth he had sung in a church choir and had enjoyed the liturgy “immensely,” but there was also something darker, a conviction at the age of twelve on the eve of the Nazi invasion of Austria that Europe was entering a period of profound evil and that he would never “give children” to his grandfather’s house. The closest he came to explaining his decision for the priesthood came when he said, speaking generally about celibacy, that the choice came from “the intimate and mysterious experience” of the heart and that such a decision is “as intimate and incommunicable as another’s decision to prefer his spouse over all others.” On another occasion he said that he did not understand the decision, that it had been “unreasonable” and almost visceral rather than intellectual. Having chosen the priesthood, he went on a long retreat to discern whether he should enter the Society of Jesus, but decided against it.⁹

After the war Illich hoped to return to Austria but lacked the proper papers. His lawyer advised that enrolling at the University of Salzburg would enable him to gain legal residency. Historians Albert Auer, who focused on medieval theologies of suffering, and Michel Muechlin, who conducted the only “educational course” that Illich ever found truly helpful, managed to capture his interest to such an extent that he went on to earn his doctorate in history, writing his dissertation on the global histories of Arnold Toynbee and the problem of knowledge in history. While continuing to work on his doctorate, Illich returned to Italy and prepared for the priesthood by studying philosophy and theology of what he called with affection “the most traditional . . . and obscurantist type” at the Gregorian University in Rome. He lived at the prestigious Colegio Capranica, wrote on theologian Romano Guardini, read the writings of Thomas Aquinas informally with Jacques Maritain, and was ordained in 1951.¹⁰

After six years studying philosophy and theology in Rome, despite the desire of Cardinal Giovanni Montini (later Pope Paul VI) that he

enter the Accademia dei Nobili Ecclesiastici, which trained intellectually gifted priests for careers as Church diplomats, he decided to become a professor. He came to the United States in 1951 to work with material at Princeton University for a *habilitation* (second doctorate) on Albertus Magnus, but became enthralled with the Puerto Rican community in New York City.¹¹ He served a largely Puerto Rican parish in New York until becoming the vice-rector of a Catholic university in Ponce, Puerto Rico, in the fall of 1956.

After losing the support of the island's bishops, Illich moved to Cuernavaca, Mexico, where he ran the Center of Intercultural Formation (CIF) as a missionary training center from 1961 to 1966. His 1967 article, "The Seamy Side of Charity," a harsh attack on the American missionary effort in Latin America, and other criticisms of the Catholic Church led to a trial at the Vatican in 1968. Although he was not convicted or punished by the Vatican, he decided to leave the active priesthood and to devote himself to social criticism during the 1970s. As Illich became a more controversial figure, his center evolved into CIDOC (Centro Intercultural de Documentación), a sort of informal university and Spanish school that attracted a diverse group of intellectuals and seekers from around the world. His closing of CIDOC in 1976 came as a shock to many of his friends and collaborators, but he was convinced that it had served its purpose and that it was time to move on before CIDOC became the kind of institution that he had been criticizing for the last decade. He kept a house in Cuernavaca for many years, traveled around the world to give seminars, and eventually settled down among a group of his friends in Bremen, Germany, where he died in 2002.

THE INTELLECTUAL MILIEU

The American Catholic milieu that Illich entered in 1951 was in flux, not only because of the thousands of Puerto Ricans pouring into New York and other parts of the mainland, but also as a result of long-term historical trends. From one perspective, the church of the 1950s was

thriving. After many decades of massive immigration from Ireland, Germany, Italy, and Poland, the rate of new Catholic arrivals in the United States had finally slowed, giving the Catholic community a chance to take stock. Much of what Catholics saw when they looked around was truly impressive. A church of immigrants had built a system of parishes, schools, and religious orders that had few equals in the world. Despite almost constant criticism and some acts of violence—including the burning of a Massachusetts convent in 1834 and a Philadelphia church in 1844—Catholics had created institutions that served their communities from birth to death. Especially in the cities of the Northeast and the Midwest, parish schools, lay organizations such as the Knights of Columbus, and a succession of events in the local parish meant that urban Catholics could spend most of their lives among other Catholics in a culture formed by Catholic traditions, practices, and values.

However, many Catholics called this sort of community a “Catholic ghetto” and pointed to its defensive posture, designed more for protection than influence. They longed for the day when Catholics would participate in the mainstream of American culture and regretted the parochialism and suspicion that they saw in the hierarchy. In the 1950s leading scholars such as John Tracy Ellis of the Catholic University of America and Thomas O’Dea of Fordham University bemoaned the vicious circle that made Catholic intellectuals marginal and ineffective. “Our defensiveness,” argued O’Dea, “inhibits the development of a vigorous intellectual tradition,” which in turn hindered intellectual achievement and academic prominence. Unrecognized and unappreciated by the larger culture, Catholic intellectuals became resentful and their defensiveness only increased. In the end, O’Dea believed, many who should have become intellectual leaders of the church and contributors to national scholarly dialogue sank instead into “a kind of stultified intellectual lethargy.”¹² The vitality and moral clarity of Dorothy Day, leader of the Catholic Worker movement, and the profound spirituality of Thomas Merton, poet and author of the bestselling *The Seven Storey Mountain*, might seem like exceptions to O’Dea’s lament, but both Day and Merton were converts. Their confident public expressions of Catholicism were encouraging to American Catholics

and intriguing to non-Catholics, but neither Day nor Merton could be claimed as a product of America's Catholic institutions.¹³

Another seeming exception was the hearty welcome that America gave to Etienne Gilson, Yves Simon, and Jacques Maritain. These French "neo-Thomists" led a revival of the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas that not only revitalized the study of philosophy in Europe and then America, but also applied Thomistic principles to a wide range of political and social issues. Maritain, in particular, seemed able to apply Thomistic thought to virtually any area of human endeavor and wrote books on anti-Semitism, modernity, aesthetics, Descartes, poetry, politics, education, and history, among other topics. Visits to the University of Chicago in 1933 and Notre Dame in 1938, a stay in New York during World War II, and a teaching stint at Princeton University from 1948 until 1953 made Maritain a pivotal figure in the American Catholic intellectual world. His gentle spirit and obvious love for America won over many who might have been intimidated by his high standards and his impassioned critiques of materialism, liberalism, and modernity.

Despite his popularity and sincere welcome at leading secular institutions like the University of Chicago and Princeton, Maritain's thought nevertheless provoked unease among many academics, whether Catholic, Protestant, or agnostic. Those who supported his left-of-center politics rarely accepted his Thomistic rationales, while those who appreciated his return to the "universal doctor" of Catholic philosophy frequently could not accept what Maritain openly called the "revolutionary" political implications of Christian principles.¹⁴ Maritain's confident demonstration of the continued applicability of Catholic thought to the most pressing issues of the day served as an inspiration and an example for a rising generation of Catholic scholars. As a French intellectual, however, he still could stand as evidence for O'Dea's argument. Where were Maritain's American peers?

If they were anywhere, it was in the community of scholars and writers gathered around the journal *The Commonweal*, "the principal organ of the break-out-of-the-ghetto school of thought."¹⁵ Started by layman Michael Williams in 1924, the journal ranged widely, treating

political and social issues from a Catholic perspective but also delving into spirituality and contemporary fiction. The journal published the work of leading American and European thinkers, including Merton, Georges Bernanos, Maritain, Day, W. H. Auden, and Robert Lowell. Opposing “the totalitarian state, dictators and violent revolution, as means or ends,” the journal advocated “the priority of human beings over property” and was “unrepentantly personalist.”¹⁶ In the pages of the journal, readers could encounter denunciations of segregation, anti-Semitism, and secularism, as well as short stories that examined American life and poems that challenged American pieties. Like many American Catholic scholars and writers, the contributors to *The Commonweal* had a complicated relationship with American politics and American popular culture, sometimes bristling with indignation at American materialism and individualism, at other times seeming overly concerned with the approval of non-Catholic figures, but its great strength was its confidence that Catholic principles could transform America. This was a Catholicism of “engagement rather than withdrawal.”¹⁷

Illich gravitated toward *The Commonweal*’s type of Catholicism. He shared many of its criticisms of American culture, as well as its desire to break free of the Catholic ghetto and its impatience with mediocrity. He was a friend of Maritain, with whom he had studied in Rome; had a close relationship with one of the journal’s editors, Anne Fremantle; and knew contributors such as Robert Lowell and Thomas Merton. Illich also had ties to two similar Catholic publications. *Integrity*, created by lay Catholics in 1946 and edited by Illich’s friend Dorothy Dohen, sought to bring a *Commonweal* type of Catholicism to a less highbrow audience.¹⁸ Writers such as Day, Merton, Fremantle, and Marion Stancioff made the journal perhaps too cerebral for the audience it was trying to reach, but they provided Illich with the cultivated, cosmopolitan atmosphere that he loved. Fremantle, for example, was an Oxford-educated Catholic convert from a prominent British family who wrote books on topics as diverse as George Eliot, Chairman Mao, medieval philosophy, and papal encyclicals. In a similar vein, Stancioff was the Brazilian-born wife of a Bulgarian aristocrat

who wrote for various Catholic publications and welcomed a stream of European visitors and refugees into her home.¹⁹ Illich also enjoyed the wit of Chicago's *The Critic*, a lay publication that specialized in skewering mediocrity and hypocrisy in the American church. Consequently, since the circle of "Commonweal Catholics" was quite small in comparison to the scope of American Catholicism, the parish priests and (non-Puerto Rican) parishioners whom Illich encountered in New York and the students and missionaries who traveled to Illich's center in Cuernavaca usually had attitudes and outlooks quite different from those of Illich and his closest collaborators. It was not surprising that he found many of them parochial and close-minded, uncritical believers in "the American way of life."

The Latin American Catholic intellectual milieu that Illich entered in the 1950s was, if possible, more traditional and hidebound than that of the United States. After centuries of association with political conservatism and the status quo, in the context of attacks by political liberals who sought to limit the church's power and to confiscate its wealth, much of the hierarchy had become defensive and narrow-minded. As he had done in America, however, Illich sought out the critics and reformers who were trying to imagine innovative ways of being Catholic; the list of his Latin American friends and colleagues includes a large portion of the leading progressive Catholics of the 1950s and 1960s. Even before he settled in Cuernavaca, Illich sought out men such as Manuel Larraín, Helder Camara, Camilo Torres, and Gustavo Gutiérrez. Larraín and Camara, two of the most influential bishops in the region, led the Latin American response to the Second Vatican Council and prepared the way for the revitalization of the Latin American bishops' conference into a forward-looking body whose bold calls for reform and "the preferential option for the poor" contrasted sharply with its previous orientation.²⁰ In a similar way, Gutiérrez used the Marxist notion of class conflict and the economic theory of dependency to argue for a fundamental shift in Catholic thought and practice. His new "liberation theology" argued that Catholics had to side with the proletariat in the ongoing battle with the bourgeoisie and that Jesus Christ was a political liberator as well as a spiritual savior.²¹ Torres

went one step further. When he became convinced that his native Colombia was incorrigibly resistant to peaceful political reform, he ended his priestly ministry and joined the guerilla fighters of the Army of National Liberation. He died in combat against the Colombian army in 1966.²²

Illich's association with these men should rule out a possible interpretation of his harsh critiques of American aid to Latin America: the idea that Illich was a partisan of the Latin America social and economic system. On the contrary, although Illich was neither a liberation theologian nor a militant revolutionary, he shared with Torres and his other Latin American friends a deep desire for extensive social and political reform in Latin America. He saw clearly the injustice and misery that plagued much of the region, and he believed that serious change was necessary. His firm conviction that Americans were the wrong agents of reform should not be taken to imply that he believed no reforms were necessary.

THE LIVES OF IVAN ILLICH

Of the two periods of Illich's years in Mexico, the "Catholic period" from 1961 to 1967 has received little attention, but in many ways it was the foundation and source of the better-known "secular period" from 1967 to 1976. The obvious question is how the two periods were related. How did the churchman become the social critic? Did he lose his Catholic faith and replace it with a sort of political religion?

This book seeks to clarify both periods and to explain the relationship between them. Even more, this book argues for the underlying unity of Illich's life and thought. Father Joseph Fitzpatrick, a longtime friend of Illich's, said in the 1990s, decades after Illich had ended his priestly ministry, "I often feel I am with the real Ivan when we say a few evening prayers together, or when he devoutly assists at my Masses."²³ Despite the different lives of Illich, he is best understood as a Catholic priest of conscious orthodoxy grappling with the crisis of Western modernity.